



A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a flowing pink dress, stands in a dark, starry landscape. In the background, a large, hazy planet or moon hangs over a dark forest silhouette. The scene is filled with glowing particles and light rays.

THE CELESTIAL KISS

BELLE CELINE

Special Thanks

If I listed everyone who deserved credit on this page, then this dedication may be as long as the book itself. I must thank everyone who has led me to this point...the good and the bad...but especially the great.

Thank you, dear reader. If you've gotten this far, then I appreciate you choosing Lilith as your companion for a while.

Darlene Smith & Kelly Schalmo, who encouraged me every step of the way.

Bill & Ruth McClintock, who taught me about love.

Chelsea Markal, who taught me about the world.

This book is dedicated with love

For my parents, Andrew and Heidi Blackhurst who exemplify unconditional love. Thank you, especially, for not expecting me to get my head out of the clouds.

For my sister, Mariah Blackhurst, who is the first to hear these ideas, the first to love these characters, and the first to drop everything and help me iron out the details. And for the fabulous book cover.

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For my angels in Heaven, Mary & William Blackhurst and William McClintock.

Also, Vicki Shreve. I'm sorry I didn't type faster.

XO

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CHAPTER ONE

The heart that Xian thrust into the air like a morbid trophy had stopped beating long ago, and yet it still dripped thick, dark blood on the flagstone ground. A body lay there in the midst of it all, vacant eyes still looking down at the hole in his chest. His face was forever frozen into a mask of surprise.

The hall was deathly silent even in spite of the dozens of men and women who stood staring at their brother's lifeless body. The only thing to be heard was the sound of my heart trying to escape from my chest. I tried to avoid looking at the corpse or the blood leeching onto the marble, but some part of me couldn't tear my eyes away from the carnage. I couldn't look away...at least not until Xian turned to one of my sisters gathered at the base of the steps and held the shriveled heart out to her.

"I believe this belongs to you."

His voice alone sent chills down my spine, but the words rattled me on a deeper level. Gabrielle stood straight with all the dignity in the world, beautiful and serene as ever. She was a quiet woman...I'd only just met her a week ago. She had always blended in fairly well where others tried to stand out and managed to avoid calling attention to herself. Until now. "I don't know what you're talking about." She said calmly.

I suspected she was telling the truth, just as I suspected that the dead man on the ground had been a scapegoat. The murder Xian had just committed was unfounded, but then that was Xian. He didn't need an excuse to be vicious. Evil was in his nature, and violence was another part of his day-to-day routine. It had taken me a while to figure that out, but having suffered his cruelty first hand, I understood: the darkness in him had no bounds.

"Don't play stupid, Gabrielle." My father sounded bored...the attention had strayed too far from him. Even I had forgotten he was there. I bristled as he stepped forward from the shadows, relishing the feel of everyone's eyes upon him...probably because he'd had forever to come to terms with his gaunt face and lank hair. I imagined that when you had lived

for a couple hundred years in the same unyielding body, you'd have to make peace with it eventually. "It doesn't suit you."

He had a voice that was slippery and cold like silk, but not half as beautiful. Disgust burned in his infinite blue eyes—the only thing that he and I had ever had in common. He turned those same eyes toward Xian, the favored son whose word my father would take over his one true daughter's. I had learned long ago that blood meant everything to these people...except where power was concerned.

"You know the infraction of which I speak." Xian had spent the past hundred years perfecting a distant, formal tone of voice. It had been a feature that once charmed me, fooled me into believing that he was a gentleman stilted by the mannerisms of an older time. Now I recognized it for what it was: pretentious. "I heard your scheming with my own ears. You and Michael intended to run away together. Such a romantic notion... alas, now he's dead."

Gabrielle remained stone-faced, but my pulse quickened. I glanced at Xian and then back to Gabrielle. He knew.

In all the years I'd been alive, nobody had ever even dreamed of running away, at least not until last week. It was no coincidence. Michael had nothing to do with any of this, and yet there he lay in a pool of his own blood, colder than the ground beneath him... Xian confirmed my suspicions when our eyes connected. It was one I'd seen several times over—*I'm cleaning up your mess, again, Lilith. You're welcome.*

Gabrielle remained impassive. She didn't fear death; She looked it right in the eye, unblinking. Guilt knotted my stomach. I thought we'd taken every precaution. She'd come to me in the dead of night, and while I had been less than enthusiastic to see her, I'd sneaked her in my room and turned up the radio so we couldn't be overheard. It didn't take her long to persuade me to help her. When she left no more than a half hour later, I checked the hall to make sure nobody had seen us together. And yet Xian knew. Of course; he always knew.

To my surprise, Gabrielle's dark red lips twisted upward. "I'm certain that you misunderstood. I *did* intend to run away, of course, but I don't need anyone's help to do it."

The faintest glimmer of surprise flickered in Xian's eyes. To anyone else, it would surely have gone unnoticed, but I knew him as well as anyone could... which wasn't saying much.

"So you confess then." Father said. "You are guilty of treason?" His thin lips looked to be on the verge of a smile. He may not ever be as malicious as Xian, but they were cut from the very same cloth.

Gabrielle's silence spoke volumes. Her strength was admirable; if it had been me on that side of father with Xian throwing accusations like knives, I'd have wilted.

Father turned to me and I buckled, anticipating the barrage of his interrogation. "Kill her." He said, waving a dismissive hand as though the very idea bored him.

They were only two simple words, but they couldn't have made less sense. He may as well have begun speaking another language.

"Father?" I looked at the man who stood next to me in his expensive suit, hardened by centuries of life. This man who had brought me into the world could so easily take people out of it. It made no sense, and yet I'd learned long ago not to question him. If father said jump, the expected response was to throw yourself off a cliff, because refusal to obey him was akin to suicide anyways.

"We've been betrayed, Lilith." His slippery voice danced around the hall, echoing my name against the cavernous walls. It cast a shadow over the crowd collected before us. They swayed as his words rippled over them, craning to whisper in each other's ear about how I would fail this, as I'd failed at everything else. "You know the price for her sins."

Gabrielle ascended the steps, never taking her eyes off my father. She was accused of planning to run away, but not from this. This, she would face head on.

"Kill her." My father said.

The weight of everyone's eyes suddenly upon me, their anticipation was like an anchor threatening to drag me into the abyss I'd only just clawed my way out of. "I...I can't."

"Weakness is not a trait that you were born with. Somehow you taught it to yourself, in spite of my exhaustive efforts to make you strong.

You can take your rightful place...you can be the person you were meant to be. Kill her."

I dared meet Gabrielle's dark eyes, expecting to see hatred or fear or accusation. I saw none of those things. Instead, she fixed me with a pointed look, meant to convey something she clearly couldn't voice. But whatever it was, it was lost on me. Was Gabrielle willing me to kill her, to release her from this endless sea of monotony, or was she urging me to continue on with the plan as we had discussed? My mouth was dry and my palms were sweaty, but I gathered the courage to look at my father. "I'm not going to kill anybody without proof of their guilt."

It was a silly thing to say, in retrospect. Father's conviction was the entire verdict one needed. You could catch a guy red-handed committing a treasonous act, but if father pardoned them, they may as well have achieved sainthood. Likewise, he could condemn the innocent to an endless Hell with a mere snap of his fingers. "Proof?" My father fixed me with an odd look, as though he were trying to assess what he'd done to deserve a daughter who defied him. "Proof is relative. Xian was witness to her plans. My most trusted officer heard Gabrielle making plans with another to leave us. Is that not incentive enough for you?"

Xian's mouth formed a smile—one of those that's really a smirk, which you only realize when you're on the receiving end. My father expected Xian's testimony to be all the evidence I needed. But my father didn't know the half of what had transpired between his favored officer and I. If he had, both Xian and I would be long dead: Xian for injuring father's pride and me for my pathetic weakness.

"One man's word shouldn't be enough to end another's life." I swallowed and dared look at my father, though it proved unnecessary. His disappointment clouded the room.

Gabrielle stepped forward so that she stood right before me. "Do it." Her voice was a whisper, just loud enough for myself and father to hear. I shook my head automatically.

Father sneered at her. "You think death will welcome you as I have?"

Gabrielle gave him a sidelong glance. "Death is a far less formidable enemy."

“You believe so?” Father laughed.

“You’re poison.” She spat. “And He...” She looked at Xian. “He is the devil. Hell must be peaceful with you above ground.” Xian took it as a compliment, never letting his smirk falter.

Gabrielle turned to me. “I’d rather die than stay here. I’d rather try and fail then live another second as your prisoner. Do this for me and I’ll consider it a gift.”

I moved toward her, to at least pretend I was considering what had been asked of me. But before I had taken two steps that beautiful face of hers slipped into shock. Her painted lips formed an ‘O’; I didn’t realize what happened until I looked down and saw the fist protruding from her chest, the only thing keeping her lifeless body upright. Xian stood behind her, and with one self-satisfied look assured me that yes, he knew all about the things Gabrielle and I had conspired over.

In an instant, he pulled his fist back and held it up into the air in triumph, showcasing his second kill of the day. Gabrielle’s body, now lifeless, fell to the ground at my feet. A strangled sound escaped me, but it was lost in a sea of murmurs as the onlookers praised Xian. They grew hungry and excited at the scent of blood, tainted though it was. They seemed unable to tame their need for violence, shifting and laughing and whooping like a rowdy bunch of teenagers until Father left, seemingly satisfied.

He didn’t so much as spare me a glance before disappearing up the stairs, and the room cleared quickly in his absence. Only I stayed, staring at the empty body before me, all that was left of my hope gone with her.

“Close your mouth, Lilith,” Xian said, sidling up next to me with his blood-stained hands in his pockets, casually surveying his kills. “You know as well as I that she got what she deserved.”

The sight of him was like a sucker punch in the stomach. I’d never been able to reconcile the two Xian’s that I’d known, or rather, thought I’d known. Even after everything that we’d been through, when I looked at him I couldn’t stop myself from feeling first the flutter of excitement when I thought of the beautiful person I’d believed him to be and then the disgust as I remembered who he truly was. It was not a flattering truth that I still allowed myself to be drawn in by someone who’d caused me so much pain,

even if those thoughts lasted only a fraction of a second. Besides, the worst of the pain hadn't been physical; It was in realizing how naïve I truly was. Perhaps the worst thing you can do to another person is to make them fall in love with someone who doesn't exist. And that's exactly what he had done to me.

"You're a murderer." I accused. It was all I could manage, at first. But I had to know why.

Before I could ask, however, Xian answered. The scariest thing about him was not how quickly he could go from impassive to furious. It wasn't how he could crush bones between his bare hands or rip a heart from the safety of its ribs. It was how well he knew me. You just couldn't escape someone like that. "Call me anything you wish, but my hands are dirty so yours don't have to be." He offered me a small smile, brushing his knuckles over my cheek in what may have been meant as a gesture of affection. But my face only burned in the path that his long fingers trailed, sticky with the blood he'd left across my pale skin.

I curled my fists into balls, willing myself to stay still, to act unaffected. It was always more satisfying to pretend he didn't faze me, rather than let him know I felt any passion for him at all. There were a dozen things I wanted to say, but they congealed in my throat. I swallowed. "This was... unnecessary."

"No," Xian shook his head, his cold eyes sharpening on me. "It was vital. Think of it as a sacrifice. They died so I wouldn't have to kill you. Your father would never forgive me for that, and he'd never forgive *you* if he knew you were in on it."

I looked at the floor to escape him, but the sight there threatened to turn my stomach. My eyes fluttered closed, and I allowed myself a few shallow breaths before opening them again. When I did, it was to Xian grabbing my chin between two icy fingers and forcing it in the direction of my broken siblings on the ground. "You may not have the blood on your hands, but rest assured, they died because of you."

I jerked out of his grasp, reeling to wipe away his touch. My skin crawled with it even after I had stepped away from him. "Why didn't you just tell my father?"

“You know why,” Xian’s lips tipped up in another smirk. “Because this is worse than any punishment he could have conjured for you.” He turned to go then, but seemed to think of something else. “Besides, you’re my favorite plaything. I told you I’d never let you go.”

He disappeared down a darkened hall, leaving me with those words hanging in the cold air. At one time they’d been a promise whispered in my ear, which had made me feel safe. Now I recognized the threat, and I couldn’t have felt any more vulnerable. I looked down at Gabrielle again and had to close my eyes to stinging tears.

Not long ago, this woman had been nothing to me other than one of my father’s retired girlfriends. Though I’d never known it, she was the person in my life who had cared about me the most. And now she was dead. I’d had a fleeting glimpse of that rarest form of consideration, and now I was alone again.

I stooped down and grabbed the paper that was still pressed in her cold hand. Her curvy words leapt over the page, the ink bleeding through to the other side of thin, yellowed parchment. Small type was transfixated to the page, and the jagged edge assured me she’d pulled this from a book. I didn’t immediately recognize any of the words on the translucent paper, but it was hard to pay attention to anything other than the single word that leapt off the page in bold black letters: Samuel.

The word stirred something deep in my mind—a name.

Gabrielle, who had never spoken to me before last Wednesday night when she came to my door, had entreated me with the words I’d needed to hear, almost as though she knew my innermost desires.

You deserve to see the world. You should know what it feels like to sleep on the beach and dance in the rain. You should be able to go wherever you want and see things that exist far beyond this world, and taste a gourmet dinner, and wear a beautiful dress, and fall in love with somebody who will love you back. You deserve more.

It was the sweetest thing anybody had ever said to me, aside from Xian’s manufactured affection. She won me over in that instant, but still I had to ask why she was doing this. Gabrielle smiled. “I’m a mother, despite being a terrible one. I made an unforgiveable mistake, one that can

never be fixed. But I will do anything to get back to Samuel, if only to tell him I'm sorry."

I knew she regretted leaving her family and desperately wanted to be reunited with her son. I also knew that she was using me to help her escape, and that she would probably abandon me once we'd passed over the threshold of father's property.

Despite my skepticism, she convinced me of one crucial thing: that I deserved more. I believed her then, and I still did. It was why I wasn't going to let her sacrifice be in vain. I would follow through with the plan, and I would get this seemingly frivolous piece of paper to her son, even if I died trying. I didn't believe her last words were an accident...they'd been carefully considered to deliver a message to me. I'd rather try and fail, she'd said, then live another second as your prisoner. As fate would have it, so would I.

CHAPTER TWO

Xian was no fool. When I stood beside him two nights later at the crest of the stairs, stationed between him and my father, he fixed me with a dubious stare. My father, too, looked at me with surprise but it quickly turned into a smile. “Look who’s decided to join us...” He offered Xian a nod of respect, as though he were single-handedly responsible for getting me here. In a way, he was.

I smiled back, hoping against hope that I didn’t look as nervous as I felt. “What’s the matter?” Xian teased. Everything about him was smug, right down to the way he leaned casually against the banister, one hand holding a glass of scotch and the other glancing at the garish gold watch he always wore, despite the fact that time was meaningless. “You get bored while you were on strike? Looking for a little action?”

My mouth was dry. I was attempting to sneak out from right under their noses. It was either genius or madness...only time would tell. I grabbed the glass of scotch from Xian’s hand and drained what was left before returning it to him. “I’m here because I need to blow off some steam. If I can’t get rid of some of this hatred for you after what you did, I just may kill you myself.”

He smirked, revealing a dimple in his left cheek that could have been a charming feature once. “Promises, promises.”

I pointedly ignored him, sweeping my long blonde hair up into a ponytail. Below us, a multitude of people milled around with drinks in hand, carefree and laughing. Excitement buzzed in the air around them like an electrical current; tonight they would overindulge in alcohol and each other. The only thing that set tonight apart from any given Tuesday was that this was the one night they would be allowed an unadulterated freedom over everything they could see, taste, or touch...everything but the city in the distance.

The hunt was an extravagant monthly occurrence. My first one had also been my last. It had been every bit as awful as I expected it would be, and I refused to ever participate again after realizing I was the bait that would lure a cool dozen humans to their excruciating death. I’d never been to one with Xian, and I’d never wanted to. Given the things he did in my

father's company, I could only imagine the things that went on when we weren't around.

Years had passed and things had changed since my first time ever leaving these grounds. The disappearances and bodies that were left in the vampires' wake added up. For the humans, it provided the fuel to an old wives' tale about demons who had lived in the woods since the beginning of time and regularly feasted on human souls. The inception of that folklore had restricted the flow of traffic through these parts, so that there was not half as many people willing to risk their lives for the supposedly breathtaking view of the city at night. I'd have said it was a good thing, but the lack of hikers and thrill-seekers just meant that the vampires had to get more creative. My understanding was this: with my brothers and sisters outnumbering the humans two to one, the hunt could be dangerous...and not just for the prey.

"I like you, Lilith." Xian ran an absent finger along my rigid collarbone before grasping the chain of my mother's necklace. It always seemed to entrance him, and this time was no different. He stared at my chest in a way that made my breath hitch, but he was intrigued by the two metal triangles, welded together so that they formed a sort of star with six loops. From the moment he'd first seen it, it had enchanted him. I suspected that in his quest to take everything away from me, he'd sought this too. Unfortunately for him, I'd not part with the only thing I had of my family, my home. He released it as if I'd spoken those thoughts aloud. "But you'd best stay out of my way. Trust me when I say that you don't want to get in the way of me and my victim."

"Trust *me*, Xian, when I say that I don't want to be anywhere near you after what you did."

"Which part?" He mused, as if he truly didn't know what I was referring to.

"Your whole purpose in life is tearing other people down to feed the chaos of your soul—or lack thereof. You wash your hands with the blood of the innocent, and if you think that I could ever forgive you for that—"

"Oh!" Xian smacked his head in understanding. "This is about Michael and what's her name...Giselle?"

“Gabrielle.” I amended, straightening with the sense of purpose she’d instilled in me.

“You’re still on that?” He laughed, looking out over the people milling around below us.

“You killed a man for no reason.”

“I had my reasons...you know I don’t like competition.”

But in spite of that sentiment, he was the first out the door, striding into the breezy night with a sense of contained purpose. I let the others go first so as not to be trampled in their frenzy, and turned back to catch my father’s eye. He stood at the top of the steps where Xian and I had been moments before, where he always delivered his accusations and punishments, a one-man jury.

My father didn’t participate in the hunt. He had spent years teaching himself to be principled and control his desires. I suspected that he got what he wanted while the rest of us had our heads turned. I also suspected that while everyone else was out indulging in sin, and I hid out in my room, he checked to ensure that nothing was amiss with his home.

Now he nodded, and though it was a nearly imperceptible movement, it filled me with a gnawing sense of guilt. In all my life, that was the closest he’d ever gotten to showing affection, and it was rare. But I knew what it meant; he was proud of me.

I traipsed through the woods alongside drunken miscreants for the better part of the night, skirting the party so that I could be seen but not noticed. Nobody had any thoughts for me, and I liked it that way. They were all so consumed with their own sheer freedom that they didn't care what I was doing, or even that I was there. One of the men offered me a flask of something I suspected was absinthe. When I turned it down, ever the buzzkill, he went to find someone else to play with, and nobody tried to immerse me in their celebration after that.

Some of them were content to just be out from under my father's thumb and didn't see the need to waste their time hunting when there was plenty for them at home. Those were the ones who I stuck with. I watched them all night, dancing through the trees intoxicated and happy, their ridiculously expensive dresses swirling in circles and their jackets strewn on branches when they disappeared to some dark pocket of the forest. By the time the inky sky started to clear up, the stars fading from view, I was just as exhausted from watching their exploits as they were from living them. Xian had been gone most of the night, and while I didn't want to think of what he was doing, I was grateful to not have to face him again.

I seized my opportunity as soon as it presented itself. The inky sky was starting to lighten through the gaps in the tree-tops when the first group headed back with drooping heads and full bellies, tired but content. And when the rest started to dissipate, the ones who were still in party mode, I watched them go, laughing and singing still like a bunch of teenagers despite their varying ages. Finally there we were, the last of us—a couple who was quite invested in one another, an older man who was passed out against a rock with his mouth open, and me. If I had changed my mind, chickened out, that would have been my last chance at redemption. But I hadn't put myself through this frivolous night of debauchery for nothing. I was bone-tired, but every bit as determined as I had been at the beginning of the night. So I walked a few steps away from them in the opposite direction. Then I ran.

I'm not sure that my absence was even noticed, but the people I'd left behind were the least of my concerns. No, the real trouble was that I was running deeper into the forest, closer to the city, towards humanity.

Had Xian passed me already, or was he ahead? Was I effectively running right into his arms?

I didn't even think about stopping until my breath came in gasps, tearing reluctantly from lungs that felt like they would explode at any moment. My entire body begged me to stop running, collapse to the ground and let them drag me back. To fall to the ground now would be to admit defeat without ever really trying...not an option. After what I'd done, handing myself over was far worse than death, and so I pushed on, denying the terror that leeched through me. Slowing down to catch a breath was out of the question—until my heart felt as though it would collapse and turn to ash in my chest. Able to breathe no more, I ducked behind a tree and pressed myself so deeply into the bark that it cut my back through my shirt. For the first time in my life I prayed. It was more of a desperate plea, but if He really did exist, He would know what I meant. *Lord please...*

The desire to run for my life warred with the desperate need to give in, which spread through my limbs like a disease. Despite my damnable pride, I was fragile. I didn't appreciate the stereotype that the others had affixed me—defenseless and meek—but I knew the delicate nature of my soul and suspected that looked sturdy compared to my physical weaknesses. I could run or I could die; the choice was obvious.

Though my lungs still seared, and my chest was like a balloon too full of air, I ran, ignoring the long branches that tore at my exposed arms, threatening to ensnare me and hold me until they found me. I focused on nothing but my feet poring over the loosely packed Earth, my chest pushing the limits... my goal. There was only the blind faith that I was running in the right direction.

With blood coursing through every part of my body, thrumming in my ears like crashing waves, it was hard to be sure but I thought I could hear my name on the wind, carried through the forest like a threat: *Lilith*. I ignored it at first, until it came again. I recognized the voice—it was the very same one that had whispered to me claims of love, proclamations of respect...all lies. The dead silence, a calm before the storm, told me my heart had quit and then a second voice, barely a whisper in the back of my consciousness: *Don't stop!*

There was someone in the shadows, watching me...I could feel him there, ready to attack.

For one moment his eyes locked on mine—the dark blue that was almost black along the outer iris, and then grey as dirty ice around the pupil and just as cold. Between us lay a thousand words—secrets, betrayals, desires. I hesitated a moment too long, trying to find in him the man who'd broken down my walls once, if only to give him a proper goodbye. That man had been an idea, manufactured for the express purpose of my manipulation.

I knew how this would end; we'd been here a thousand times before. But this time was different. I only had a few seconds...

I used them to burn a trail through the uncharted forest, pushing myself through the dark vegetation. I understood nothing other than my desire to escape, keep myself alive and make her sacrifice worthwhile. Everything lost meaning, except for my sister, whose face melted in with the hundreds I'd come to know in my lifetime.

The trees were thick enough to eke out almost all of the slowly rising sunlight. The ground was littered with fallen branches and piles of decaying leaves, choked by the impending autumn. The obstacles meant I had to rely upon instinct to tell me where to place my feet, where to duck and jump and turn. It was completely an aimless path, but I cared only to put enough distance between myself and him so that I could eventually slip away into the safety of daylight.

Don't look back. Was he still following me? I couldn't tell. There was only the sound of blood coursing through my ears and my heart thudding against my ribs. Each bounding step drained more of my energy, now that the initial rush of adrenaline was starting to wane. Still, I ran for what felt like hours, 'til my body went from heavy with ridiculous pain to awkwardly numb. Lead weights had surely replaced my muscles; each breath I took was like a knife sliding between my ribs. I slowed down, tripping over my own two feet, too exhausted to summon any more energy. And then I looked back.

There were only trees behind me, and a path littered with broken branches and fallen leaves. It was quiet, almost serene. But he could be anywhere.

My brain flickered to autopilot as I stumbled along, listening for any sort of noise beyond the leaves crunching underfoot. The full gravity of what I had just done was beginning to settle over me. I had left the only

place I'd ever known with nothing but the clothes on my back. I had no food, no money, and worst of all, no direction.

What I did have, though, was hope. The city had to be close—on occasion, Father would break his own law and go out into town in search of a new fascination to occupy his time. He would lure humans from the shadowy city alleys and corners, tempting them with the promise of eternal life.

Eternity had nothing to offer me. As a kid it was easy to keep myself occupied. I would color or paint the sprawling stone walls and watch the prospective candidates for immortality (glorified slaves) run around cleaning my messes. I shadowed them, watching their every move and entertaining delusions that one day I would be like them, normal and limited and human. But they were gone now, killed for trivial mistakes, or locked in the crypt for meals, or turned after proving to my father their worth.

And though there was always a party to be found in one of the drafty rooms with booze and blood abounding, I still couldn't be entertained. My brothers and sisters (all the people that my father had turned) would engage in frivolous activities like gossip, drinking games, and carnal affairs I tried not to give much thought to. Those things seemed fun when I had barely been a teenager but as I'd grown, the world I'd been born into only grew darker as more of the workings of my cohabitants were revealed to me. As my father's only blood relative, I didn't realize until around my thirteenth year that my special status didn't make me royalty—it made me a target.

Being the center of their anger and jealousy had taught me to rely firstly on myself. My mother died while I was young, and my father was anything but fatherly, so the concept had been instilled in me from a young age. I'd thought for a long time that being alone was the worst thing that could happen to me, but Xian had proven to me that feeling alone in another's company was infinitely worse. I had more purpose out here, wandering aimlessly through the trees, than I'd ever felt at home.

Once my shallow breathing subsided, I realized I'd been ignoring the sounds of life that carried to me on the wind. Though the thin band of sunlight that glimmered through the trees gave me hope, I was not out of the woods yet. The city was near, but I had to keep going.

When I emerged through the thinning trees at last, it was both overwhelming and underwhelming, a sensory overload that I could only compare to the endorphin rush of being bitten. I felt like a newborn child, frightened and excited by the sounds, the sights, even the smell, which was so unlike the earthy scent of the woods I'd just emerged from.

Opposite the stretch of forest where I stood was a cluster of buildings, some tall and others wide and squat. They all had one thing in common: they were dark and dingy. A few windows in the taller building were crossed with wooden beams, the street below littered with trash. My ears buzzed with the electrical current of a nearby streetlight. The rain clouds that gathered in the sky only served to make them look more desolate. It didn't look like anybody's safe haven, but it would have to do for now.

At the briefest break in traffic, I ran across the road, barely avoiding a car. Its speed blew the tangled curls off my neck, and the sound of a horn blasted through my ears. But the sound was swallowed by the laughter of a few old men standing in a ring, clutching onto mugs of coffee right out in front of a few massive trucks. One of them turned to look at me, offering a small nod from under a faded ball cap. I graced him with the smallest movement of my lips that could be considered a smile and moved past them toward the only building that showed any signs of life.

The smell of maple syrup drifted through the doors the moment I walked in. Though it was still early, the little diner had its fair share of customers. They all seemed innocuous enough—a couple with too many young children, a few men minding their own business at the counter, and an elderly pair who seemed incredibly chipper given the hour.

I staked out the room and made a beeline for the table in the furthest corner. Sinking into the booth gave me an unexpected relief; my exhaustion made itself remembered. I let my head fall into my hands, seeking a moment of peace.

A young woman with her hair pulled into a bun appeared at my side almost instantly. "Coffee?" She held up a pot of something dark and bitter smelling.

"No, thank you."

“Hot chocolate then?” She offered brightly. “It’s awful cold out for September.” I detected the hint of a southern accent in her buttery voice. It wasn’t a sound that I was used to.

“No, thanks, I’m fine.”

“Orange juice?”

I fixed her with that look my brothers and sisters say I should be infamous for, as if to ask if she were seriously going to keep trying. But her smile caught me off guard, and so I bit back my sarcastic answer. “How about water?”

“Sure thing,” The waitress agreed, then turned and sashayed away.

A scuffle across the room caught my attention, and I straightened a bit to see a young man backed against the wall, and another man before him with a fistful of plaid collar in his hand. Yet, despite the circumstances, the man who was backed against the wall didn’t look scared...in fact, he looked amused. They were too far for me to hear what was being said, but their conversation looked intense.

“Julius,” A voice informed me, and I turned to see the waitress at my side, watching the men in the corner. Her eyes were alight with interest, but she seemed to realize that she was showing some sort of vulnerability, because she straightened and looked back at me. “He’s got a bit of ritual for staying out drunk ‘til morning and coming here to sober up. He’s a bit of a troublemaker, for sure, but he’s good-looking.”

I made a noncommittal noise and took a sip of water, waiting for the girl to take her leave. Instead, she slid onto the red vinyl bench across from me and propped her elbows up on the table, commanding my attention. “I’m Larissa.” She offered.

“Lilith,” I said warily.

“That’s a unique name, ‘Lilith’.” She paused, considering the sound of my name on her tongue. I knew then that I should have lied. “You should know, Lilith...” She hesitated for a second, glancing around. “You look out of place, sitting here by yourself.”

I arched an eyebrow, surprised by the shift from sweet and unassuming to blunt. “I’m not from around here.” I shrugged.

Larissa examined me with knowing eyes. “I’m just gonna cut to the chase. If you’re here for... work... you’d probably want to leave now. Boss man ain’t so tolerant of that illegal stuff since he’s been on parole.”

“I’m... sorry...” I knew what she meant, but I didn’t know what had made her say that. I tried not to let her know the suggestion offended me, but it was unfounded. “What?”

“You’re a pretty girl, alone in the moors at a time most girls your age are still sleepin’. I don’t know your story, but if you’re here for some kinda drug deal, you’d best take your leave.” Her chin jutted towards the door.

“I’m not here for a drug deal.” I assured her, my voice a little indignant even to my own ears.

“Well, what then? You sure as Hell didn’t come for a cup of coffee.”

A frustrated sigh escaped my chest, and I planned to tell her my being there was none of her business, but I caught her eyes...sweet and warm like honey, they were thickly lined with black, but that didn’t hide her concern. I held her gaze a moment before looking away.

“I’m hiding,” I confessed, and of their own accord my eyes swept the room. Thinking about Xian set me on edge, and I couldn’t help but make sure he wasn’t close.

“Hiding?” The inflection of her voice informed me that it was not the answer she had been expecting.

“From my ex-boyfriend,” I continued. It was kind of true, anyways...Xian had been my boyfriend once. Recognition lit up her eyes, but not in a remotely fond way. She seemed to know the feeling.

“Ah, well that’s always fun.” Larissa’s sour expression told me she knew it was anything but. Turning around, she surveyed the room before focusing back on me. “He here?”

“Outside.” I said, comforted by the fact that once again that was true. Xian was somewhere outside, just maybe not outside the building.

“Well, you see that man at the counter? The one reading the paper. That’s the sheriff. He’s a good man, maybe a little too fond of looking the other way, but he’ll make sure nothing happens here. Not in my diner.”

“I don’t want any trouble.” I said honestly.

“Then there won’t be any,” She smiled and stood, smoothing down the edges of her skirt. “If you need anything, a refill or maybe an alibi, just holler.” She winked before heading over to tend to the elderly couple.

I made a conscious effort to relax myself into the booth, but was certain not to take my attention off the door. This sleepy diner was not the city I’d imagined, but I could certainly see the point that Larissa had made. It was an odd cluster of buildings, not your typical tourist trap. It was no stretch of the imagination that some shady misdeeds did take place around here.

Larissa appeared again not even twenty minutes later. “How’s it going?”

I hesitated a moment, looking into her friendly face. I’d learned not to trust anyone, but she seemed so honest. And I couldn’t sit there all day. I had to get away from here and figure out where I could find Samuel. “There is something you could do,” I offered, taking this opportunity as it presented itself.

“What’ll it be?”

“I need to get as far from here as possible, but I’m low on cash and —well I don’t know my way around.”

“How much do you need?” She asked, reaching into the pocket of her apron and producing a fold of rumpled dollars bills.

“No,” I shook my head, trying not to sound ungrateful. It was a generous offer. “How about some advice, instead? I need to get somewhere I can regroup and get myself together. Do you think you could point me toward the bus station, or a taxi or...?”

“That bad, huh?” She offered me a look so full of sympathy, it made me feel bad for deceiving her.

“Pretty bad,” I agreed. “Yeah.”

Larissa looked to be on the verge of speaking when someone called out her name from across the room. She sighed without even turning, put up a finger to tell him to wait a moment, and then focused on me once more. “Can you wait just a few minutes while I go shut him up?”

I peeked behind her to see the angry man who had called for her standing behind the counter with his thick, tattooed arms crossed before his broad chest. “Yeah, I’ll be here.”

“Be right back.” She promised.

Relieved, I sat back in the booth and looked absently around the room. Goose bumps raced up my arms even before I connected eyes with him, but when I did, I felt like there was something gnawing in my stomach. The man Larissa had pointed out, Julius, stared at me with dark eyes and a look of hatred. I broke contact immediately, and rubbed my arms to ward off the chill that had sprung up in me. It was like he could see into my soul, into my past...like he knew what I was. I recognized the look of a hunter, even though I’d never seen a live one.

In an attempt to seem casual, I focused on the sweaty water glass before me a moment and then gathered a sufficient amount of courage. Through my lashes, I saw that the other man had stood up, turning a pair of prying eyes towards me. With no further hesitation, I slid off my seat in a fluid motion and instinctively headed toward the door. Realizing that would require me to pass him, I paused, scanning for a restroom. The hand that landed on my shoulder was light, but I jumped nonetheless and found myself face to face with Larissa.

“Hey, you ok?” Concern marred her pretty face, and she looked over my shoulder. “Is he here?”

“I need to get out.”

“Come with me.” Larissa’s hand closed on my wrist and she led me through a maze of empty tables, ignoring the man who started yelling at her when she dragged me through the swinging door that led behind the counter. She continued to ignore him as she led me through a crowded back room, past stacks of milk crates and shelves packed with cans. A glaring red sign showed me the exit, and Larissa threw it open, heedless of the wailing alarm that erupted around us. “Come out of the alley and make a left. Follow the road a couple blocks down. You’ll need to cross the street when you get to Jefferson, but you’ll see the sign for the subway.” I looked at her blankly, trying to get my mind to process what she was saying. “Go on, you’ll have a decent head start.”

“Thank you,” I breathed, my throat tight with the cold as a plume of air bloomed around me. She gave me a slight nod, and I stepped out the door into a shadowy darkness. The sky was moments from opening up in a torrential downpour; thunder cracked overhead. The door shut behind me, and a few moments later the wailing alarm ceased, paving the way for silence. I gathered my bearings, then pushed through the alley, repeating the directions in my head.

I saw the two figures before I heard them, leaning up against the alley, clouds of smoke hanging in the chilly air around them. I pressed myself into the wall as much as I could and carried on, picking up my pace and focusing intently on the ground.

“You look lost.” One of the men said. His tone fell just short of friendly.

I glanced at him and immediately regretted it, for the feigned friendliness was nothing more than a taunt, his ‘smile’ more of a leer. “No,” I said, trying to offer up a small smile, to act unconcerned.

“Where you going?” The second man chimed in, his voice cutting like steel through the quiet dark dawn.

Deciding silence would speak volumes, I tried to walk around the side of them, knowing that behind me was nothing but the locked door. I heard his movement and felt his presence as the man tried to sandwich me between him and the other. That was his mistake. I pushed him to the side just hard enough so that the man stumbled backwards a few paces. That was *my* mistake. “Stay away from me.” I warned, fixing him with a cold look which I hoped disguised my fear.

I’d heard rumors of what happened in places like this, with people like them. My brothers had exchanged stories about the meals they’d made and the entertainment they’d found in dark allies like this one, in cities where there was so much crime that a few deviant acts in a back alley were barely a drop in the bucket.

The other man reacted quickly, and as I turned to contend with him, the second shoved me against the wall. He didn’t seem to be too much older than I. “No one ever taught you how to treat a man?”

“No one ever taught you how to treat a lady.” I fired back, my voice level despite my anger. *Remain calm, Lilith. Don’t let them see what you*

really are.

“Oh, I know a thing or two,” The man purred, fixing me with a languid once-over.

My heart threatened to beat out of my chest, and a peal of nausea tore through me, but my experience with Xian had taught me to disguise it. I could fight and I would if I had to, but I didn’t know if it would do much good.

“Yeah, I picked up a few things here and there,” Agreed the younger one, moving closer. They effectively eked out whatever dismal light slipped between the buildings, so that they stood between me and any way out.

“I have nothing of value.” I said.

“Well,” they looked between each other. “I’m sure we could think of something.” He moved a strand of my hair from my face, and I batted his hand away.

“I think you should let me go on my way.” My voice was barely a whisper, not at all intimidating as I’d hoped.

“Oh no. You wanted to get physical...let’s get physical.” The one who had me pinned to the wall moved in closer, to my face, my neck, his eyes sweeping over the scars there—countless pinpricks, remnants of older marks, and some bruised, crescent shaped ones from the more recent months. He trailed a long finger down my neck, and I shuddered as it dusted my collarbone. His eyes lit on the pendant resting against my chest.

Grinning, he moved closer, pushing his face toward my neck. Instinct took hold of me; I slammed my head into his face, and when he backed up with his nose cupped between his hands and blood spreading over his fingertips, swung as hard as I could with my fist. I barely had a moment to register satisfaction before the second man was in my face, his large hands grinding me against the brick wall.

“You’ll pay for that, you stupid—”

But he never finished his threat, because he was thrown to the ground in the next instant. I looked up into the eyes of another, third man, and was about to utter a thank you when he pinned me by my neck against the wall. Without even removing his eyes from mine, he commanded the other two, “Get out of here!” His voice was a deep and guttural growl. I

was unable to pry my eyes from my assailant, but the scuffle and sound of running footsteps told me that they were gone in a matter of seconds. The new threat released his chokehold and shook me so hard my head hit the wall, blurring the world before me, but I was grateful at least to be able to breathe again as I gasped to fill my lungs.

This man was strong—more so than I imagined any human to be—and with the blow to my head, I felt a little faint, unable to attack or defend myself. I blinked slowly, and opened my lips to say something, anything, when a roar ripped through the air. The man turned slowly, as if he'd been expecting this new addition. When the weak morning sunlight broke through a crowd and fell on his face, I recognized my attacker was Julius from the diner. "I've got this one, James." His voice was wrought with irritation, but that didn't stop the other figure from charging.

It moved too fast for me to register it, but in a matter of seconds, the thing was upon me, its teeth buried in my shoulder. The force of it was completely new, and paramount to the bites of vampires I was accustomed to. Unable to do anything else, I screamed. In the very next second, it released me as if my scream really were some sort of deterrent. With nothing to hold me up, all my energy finally exhausted, I slid to the dirty ground with a hand pressed to my bleeding shoulder, my teeth bared against another scream.

Everything burned, a pain unlike anything I thought was possible, but in the seconds following that didn't seem to matter. Nothing did, except for the creature before me, easily twice my size from down here, with massive paws that could cave my chest in within seconds.

I could smell it now, something I'd heard of, something I'd read about. My vision blurred, my heart slowed, and my eyes grew heavy as I realized—I'd been bitten by a werewolf.

There was no holding it back this time. I screamed again, as fire and ice spread through my veins in quick succession, a white hot symphony of barbed flames that tore through my skin straight into my veins. The world was shaking as it turned white, like the blinding pain. And then...black.

CHAPTER THREE

That blackness held me tight, refusing to release its hold on me even the next day. I fought the dregs of darkness, but woke up to darkness of another kind.

I immediately noticed the cold—the hard concrete beneath me allowed the frigid air to seep straight through to my bones. The next thing I realized was that the pain, which had been present at the back of my skull while I was unconscious, had taken over practically every inch of my body. It wasn't a typical pain though—it was like waking up with a hangover and realizing I'd been hit by a truck. Blood coursed through my temples, making the ache there more pronounced. I tried to gather myself into a sitting position, but felt too heavy to move. I braced myself to try again. That's when I noticed the thick iron shackles on my wrists, their weight holding me in place. I pulled on them, testing their strength, but the effort was exhausting so I lay my head against the wall, trying to recall where I was, and what had led me here.

“Nice of you to finally join us.” A voice broke the silence, echoing off the walls. I winced, not only at the voice that stirred some memory in me, but at the way his voice echoed through my skull.

Confusion steeped my brain for a long moment, and then I placed it. Trying to dredge up the memory hurt too much, but it came to me in flashes—the men outside the diner, the one who threw them away—Julius, who I'd thought for a fraction of a second was going to help me...then the creature, something between a man and animal, its eyes full of fury as its teeth clamped around the hollow of my shoulder. Recalling that extraordinary pain...incisors digging through flesh and tearing into muscle... I reached for my shoulder, the cold metal chains scraping over my body, and felt the ridged skin healing there.

The sound of a chair grating against concrete issued from somewhere just a few feet before me, and a couple footfalls later, there was a flicker of light as a match bloomed to life. Looking past the offensively bright flame, I saw him. Julius. As if an electrical current had shot through me, I jerked back until I hit the wall again.

“You’ll not be going anywhere.” His voice was casual, but he couldn’t conceal the malice in his eyes. “Those chains are reinforced iron, attached to steel beams underneath the concrete, so strong that no werewolf could break them.” He looked proud for a moment, but then he spoke his next words with unconcealed disgust, “Much less a *vampire*.” I shuddered as his eyes trailed over me, but it wasn’t the way the two lowlifes had looked at me in the alley—this was a look brimming with hatred. “There are two ways for you to get out of here. You either go in a body bag, or you play nice. I’m fine with either.”

“You did this to me!” I accused, holding my arms up by way of illustration. I let them fall almost as quickly, not willing to let him see the strain it caused.

“Wish I had.” He said, and what I could see of his smile was amused. “You did this to yourself. What were you doing in the city?”

Jaw clenched, I made up my mind not to tell him anything. He watched me then, perfectly still, and I turned my head away, probing the darkness for anything that would help me get free. “You were found on werewolf territory on the day of the full moon. Not just one strike but two.”

The accusation came as a shock, forcing me to look at him again. “I never crossed onto werewolf terrain!” I said loudly, truly indignant at the thought of what he insinuated. As if I would willingly put myself in that kind of danger.

“You were in the city, an extension of the werewolves’ protection. By that token, you were hunting on our land.” The candlelight glowed brighter for a moment and I caught a glimpse of him leaning forward, his jaw tense, as if he were fighting the desire to act upon something. It only made my anger grow, a mirror of his.

“I wasn’t hunting!” My voice was a growl, but the threat was empty.

“So you were just there to entertain those men for a little while?” It wasn’t necessary for the flame to flicker over his doubtful expression; the sarcasm was rife in his voice.

“To entertain them?” I gasped, feeling sick with confusion and pain and injustice. “They had me cornered, not the other way around!”

He snorted a laugh. “As if I haven’t seen that act before. Tell me, do you get a cheap thrill from making them think they’re in control and then turning the tables? You are one sick, twisted little girl.”

Squinting through what little light there was, I saw the determination in his face, the way it shaded his dark eyes. Arguing with this man was useless. I turned away, wishing to erase his face from my thoughts, but it was already burning into my mind, searing deeper with the brand of profound anger. I heard his footsteps come closer, and though I pointedly refused to turn, he bent down and grasped my chin with one hand, forcing my eyes to meet his. The candle flickered on the floor, barely illuminating half of his face. When he spoke next, his voice was deceptively soft, the poison of it thinly veiled. "All you have to do is admit you were hunting, that you were wrong, and it will all go away. The pain, the cold, the hunger..."

The hunger. I hadn't noticed it before, but as he said it I realized it was there, rolled in with the fatigue and the anger. The promise of its release was seductive, but I knew what it meant to agree. I tore away from his touch and he stood, taking with him my only source of light. I watched it bob across the room and then come to a stop as he paused, turning to me. "I have all the time in the world. It's you who's running out of it." His voice was cryptic, much like the message, and he hesitated a few moments as though expecting me to ask what he meant. But I stayed silent and seconds later, heard the creaking of a heavy metal door grinding open. Light filtered into the room, and though it was dim, it was an assault on my eyes. By the time they'd adjusted, I barely caught a glimpse of a barren corridor before the door closed.

Frustration and confusion surged through me. Overwhelmed, I lay my head against the wall and tried to sort through what I knew. But none of it made sense, other than the understanding that I had run from one prison to another. It was a sobering thought.

The temptation of sleep was so enticing, with its promise of escape, no matter how temporary. Within minutes darkness had mixed together, twining so deeply that I could not distinguish sleep from wakefulness.

The grating of the doors opening again pulled me from a sleep I didn't know I'd slipped into, and I opened my eyes against the light that came in through the doorway. Blinking rapidly, I noticed a figure silhouetted in the door. Although he looked very much like Julius, this wasn't the same man. They were undoubtedly brothers, but this one was taller, had a more commanding presence. When I met his eyes, I noticed something else—this was the man who'd bitten me.

My heart hammered an entirely new rhythm in my chest, beating double time, skipping, and faltering. The shackles seemed heavier and the room smaller, the air suddenly toxic, but I looked up at him, determined not to let him see my terror.

“How are you feeling?” His voice was deeper than Julius’ and yet somehow more gentle. It was the last thing I’d expected from him. He hesitated before dropping his weight on his legs, bending down so his face and mine were level, yet he maintained a respectful distance. “If the pain is too much, I can ease it. But you have to tell me or I can’t help.”

I eyed him shrewdly, afraid to speak, to move, even to breathe. Something flickered in his eyes—the ghost of compassion—but it was gone as quickly as it had come. “You *bit* me.” It was a painfully simple accusation, but it was all that mattered.

“Yes.” His eyes were unreadable. More than half of his face was concealed in shadow, but what I could see of it did not look nearly as menacing as Julius.

I’d expected more, a defense perhaps, but when he offered nothing, I asked, “Why?”

“You were a threat.” His eyes held mine, but I could feel his desire to look away and the disgust that permeated the air. He just didn’t have enough regards to waste his hatred on me as Julius had.

“Funny, I was the one who felt threatened.” I turned away, my eyes burning as the memory came flooding back to me. *Don’t cry. Don’t give him that.*

“Hunting in the city is strictly forbidden. You must have known.”

“I wasn’t hunting.” The rage, the indignity from earlier was all absent this time. Now it was hollow and tired, much like me.

“Then what were you doing there?” It wasn’t accusatory; instead, he seemed to be imploring me to give him an acceptable answer. I bit my lip, not wanting to trust him with the truth. But the way he spoke, the way he looked at me, and the fact that I didn’t have many other options all appealed to my good sense, and I found myself speaking the truth.

“I ran away.” The admission made my cheeks burn as I realized how stupid it sounded. Of course, yesterday it hadn’t seemed crazy; on the contrary, it had seemed perfectly excusable. I’d reached the end of my rope there, but how could I possibly explain that to a stranger? No, he didn’t need to know why I’d left.

“From what?” He asked, his soft voice entreating me to continue. I appraised him suspiciously. He *seemed* to want to help. He was solid, built lean and strong; he could have killed me before, but he didn’t.

I skimmed his face, unsure whether I should answer, but there was something there that told me to trust him, even though everything I already knew about him told me I should do the exact opposite. “Imprisonment.” I said, and then unable to stop myself, I laughed. “That worked out real well.” The chains rattled on my wrists as if to illustrate my point. I bit my lip, having divulged more than I’d meant.

“What kind of imprisonment?”

Already I’d confessed more than I wanted. “You don’t deserve anything from me.”

He stood, backing away from my anger, and scrubbed his hands over his face as if he could wipe away his frustration by the very act. A sigh escaped him. “I can’t help you if I don’t understand.”

“You clearly aren’t in the business of helping people.” I deadpanned.

“Please,” His voice seemed strained. “I need to know why you were there that morning. I need to know what you were running from.”

“That’s none of your business.”

I thought for a second he might laugh, and then his expression darkened. “I bit you.” He said, as if the pain were not a visceral enough reminder. “You *are* my business. I call the shots where you are concerned. *I control your fate now.*” He paused, then deciding that he hadn’t yet made his point, added with a smirk, “You’re my puppet.”

His words rattled me to the bone. Any pretense we’d had of being pleasant was gone.

“So kill me then!” I snapped, practically shaking with unbridled rage. “You’ll do it anyways!”

He looked momentarily stunned, but then the corners of his lips turned up. “Why kill you yet? I have plans for you.”

I laughed to disguise my fear. Because although I couldn’t possibly imagine what his plans were, it wasn’t exactly an inspiring promise. The words struck a chord, and I wouldn’t sit quietly. “You don’t know who you’re messing with.”

The man laughed too, but his wasn’t to throw a veil over fear. Instead, he seemed to be truly amused by my comment. “I think I do. You

see, there aren't many instances of people like you, not quite a vampire and certainly not a human. You're nearly indestructible prey, and you admitted yourself you ran away from something. I'm smart enough to gather that you are something of a rarity, and rarities always fetch a price."

In an instant, he managed to touch on my deepest fear—being returned to the darkness after just barely escaping it. "Well, then you're even dumber than you look if you think you can negotiate over me. I'm nothing to them."

"Something tells me that's not true. After all, you don't lock up things that mean nothing to you."

I swallowed, feeling feverish. I'd have said anything to get him to abandon the idea of returning me to that torture. "They don't want me now. Unless you want to be stuck with me forever, I'd just cut your losses."

"Forever?" He gave me a level look. "You have precisely twenty four days. If I haven't gotten what I need by then, you'll no longer be my problem."

Twenty four days was a long time. The number shocked me. He couldn't honestly keep me here for more than three weeks, could he? It was my turn to pose a question, and I tried to keep my voice steady as I asked, "Until what?"

He glanced at me, and there was something there that hinted at pity. It caused a surge of anger to shoot through me. It was quickly followed by a shooting sensation.

The pain in my shoulder was crippling as it made itself remembered, and I bit back a groan, clasping a hand to the offending spot. Touching the skin there didn't hurt...the pain actually seemed to radiate from within me.

"And so it begins," He muttered. I looked up at him, gauging his fathomless eyes with every intention to find out what that was supposed to mean, but he turned away abruptly and headed for the exit. "For what it's worth," he turned back toward me. His face was mostly concealed by shadows, and his voice sounded distant, but something in the way he spoke almost led me to believe the next words to leave his lips, "I'm sorry."

CHAPTER FOUR

The next time the door opened, I had no way of knowing how much time had passed. I only knew that I was angry, and I'd have to sink my teeth into either of them so that they could understand even a fraction of what I felt. I wanted to bite them, even though the thought of their metallic blood disgusted me. I wanted to throw myself at either of them and kick, scream, anything that would ease this corrosive hatred burning a hole through me.

But this time it was a girl, probably around my age, tall, and beautiful.

She stepped closer, and when I shrugged away, looked as though she had been slapped. "You don't have to be afraid of me," The girl insisted, flashing a key and a small smile, "I'm going to unlock you."

My heart faltered. Was this a trick, or was she taking me somewhere worse? Either way, I didn't have much choice, and so I let her support my wrist with her hand as she twisted the key. I eyed her cautiously, considering her kind face, until the chain dropped free, and she moved to the second one. When it fell to the ground with a resounding clank, the relief was immediate. I felt lighter, shaking my wrists to return the feeling to them.

"Oh, I've forgotten my manners," The girl said, stretching her hand out to me. "I'm Janna."

With her hand out, she looked like a child trying to earn the trust of a stray dog. The irony of that imagery wasn't lost upon me. I fixed her hand with a reproachful stare until she retracted it.

My eyes flickered to the door that she'd left open. Was she testing me, or did she think I didn't stand a chance of escaping?

"I want to help you." She said.

"Is this what you consider helping me?" I sneered. "Locking me up in your cellar?"

"I know you won't believe it, but that's really for your own good."

"Of course it is. And attacking me, was that for my own good too? Some sort of initiation into this little gang of yours?"

“Gang?” Janna repeated. Her mouth turned down a little, and a delicate crease formed at the bridge of her nose as she tried to understand.

“This whole good cop, bad cop routine you’ve got going on with the other guys,” I said, “It’s not going to work on me, so just tell me what you want from me.”

Understanding lit her eyes. “You mean my brothers?” She laughed. “Julius can be callous, yes. But James...he just doesn’t know how to react right now. No one does, really.”

“You can answer some of my questions.” I suggested. “Like what you are doing with me?”

“Okay, fair enough.” Janna nodded at the door, but I remained still as she began to walk toward it. “Unless you *don’t* want to know what we’ve planned for you. In that case, you’re welcome to stay here ‘til you’ve changed your mind.”

She was practically out the door by the time I gathered myself up. The pulsing had taken up residency in my head again, and the moment I stepped from the previously dark room, the afternoon sun that poured in through a nearby window assaulted my eyes. Yet I followed her, fingers skimming the stone wall in an effort to keep steady, because my other choice was to go back to the darkness and lay there until I was dead. With each step we took, I grew more confident in my own balance, and the light began to hurt less. I took the newfound sense of clarity as an opportunity to take in my surroundings, but there was not much to see.

We were walking down a very long hallway, with large wooden doors on either side every couple of feet. Simple brick walls were about all that there was to the space, except for the window at the end of the hall behind us. The further we went down the corridor, the darker it got, until we stopped in almost complete blackness. I’d been focusing on everything but the direction we were headed, looking for any route of escape other than the one I was being led to. For that reason, I hadn’t noticed we’d come to a dead end.

I fixed Janna with a suspicious look, but she placed her hand there and found a latch. Moments later the bricks parted to form a space just large enough for us to pass through. Janna stepped through immediately, obscuring my view, but as I followed I saw that wherever we had come

from, we were now in what appeared to be a house. Here, the surroundings were far less dull.

Sunlight illuminated everything, so intense that I cringed away from it. The entire ceiling was a glass dome, supported by concrete beams that came down to form columns in the walls. The entire room, in fact, was circular, and I took a step back to observe it better without the barrage of the sun.

Dark wood floors gleamed against the light, and archways nestled in between the columns, all open, offered an unhampered view of other parts of the...what was it, actually? A mansion?

The archway directly opposite us was closed off by two heavy oak doors. I realized it for what it was—my escape. With no one else around, I might have the perfect chance now, if I just made a break for it. Janna did not seem to be impressively athletic. I contemplated the thought a moment too long, because in the next second, two figures emerged from the archway right next to us. I saw James first, but when my eyes fell on Julius, I took my chance and ran.

I had barely made it halfway across the expansive room when I ran into what felt like a brick wall, and felt hands on my arms, locking me in place. I tore out of Julius' grasp so quickly that the force knocked me backwards. James offered me a helping hand, palm up. I looked at him with such disdain that I expected him to withdraw it, but he didn't let his hand fall to his side until I was on my feet and had put a little space between us.

"What number did you do on her?" Janna scowled at her brothers.

"Janna," The younger brother's voice sharpened on her name. James.

"I'm just saying, she's terrified of you. Look at her." Janna placed a gentle hand on my arm, but her touch burned right through me. I tore away, angry that she thought she had any right to act like we were friends. Julius' lips twitched, but Janna seemed unaffected. "Anyways, we were just going to get ready."

"An hour early?"

"Well, I don't know, Julius," Her voice was sprinkled with sarcasm, "but I think if I'd been thrown into a cellar for days, I'd want a long, hot

shower before meeting the King's council."

"I wouldn't waste our water on the likes of her." His dark eyes seemed to see right through me, as though I were insubstantial. My life meant nothing to him, but for some reason here I still was. "Besides, she probably only likes to bathe in the blood of the innocent."

"Don't be crass." His sister chided. "She's a guest."

"She's worthless," Julius rolled his eyes and walked away, then offered a warning over his shoulder, "Don't be late."

Janna rolled her own eyes by way of response, and then turned to her other brother. "We'll see you in an hour." He didn't answer except for a nod, his thoughtful gaze fixated on me, and went off to follow his brother. Janna turned to me. "I promise they're not always so intolerable. This way."

She led me under one of the arches, and I was surprised to see that the room was relatively small. Janna made her way to a tall staircase that spiraled upwards, and I followed her, knowing I couldn't go back the other way. At the top there was a landing with several doors, and she showed me to the first of them. "Just about everything you'll need is in there, including a change of clothes. Makeup too, if that's your thing, though you clearly don't need it."

I really looked at her for the first time, and saw the compassion in her eyes, rich and warm like melted chocolate. It made me uncomfortable. I reached hesitantly for the handle, uncertain whether I should believe that I was really headed to take a shower and not to have my head chopped off. But something about her made me want to trust her, so holding my breath, I opened it and stepped into what was easily the largest bathroom I'd ever seen.

True to her word, Janna had set out clothing for me, neatly folded on the counter. The shower seemed large enough to accommodate several people. I pulled back the curtain quickly, wary that there was someone waiting to lunge out from behind it. But I was alone in the oversized bathroom, and that left me with an opportunity. Unfortunately, there was not a single window in the entire space. The only door revealed nothing more than a linen closet and I even tried the door I'd entered through, which

had locked behind me. With nowhere to go, I decided I may as well take advantage of the shower.

The hot water did a number of services for me, from relaxing away the aches in my body to clearing away the cobwebs in my head. When I emerged from the steam what seemed like hours later, I felt nothing short of refreshed. I dressed in the clothes that had been set out on the counter, a simple pink dress that was just a bit too bright. I thought of the lithe girl outside who'd no doubt plucked this from her closet for me, and couldn't help but feel silly. I had been attacked and imprisoned without much of an explanation, and still with no answers, I was playing dress up.

I felt too vulnerable, too exposed when I looked in the mirror. The thin straps didn't cover much of my marred neck, but I brushed my hair out and laid it across my shoulders. It was the best I could do, but it wasn't enough.

This time when I tried to open the door, it was unlocked, and Janna stood on the other side. She too, looked refreshed, wearing a fresh dress and a smile. "You look great." She said, as though we were old friends. "Now just relax. The king isn't as bad as his sons." Janna smiled to herself, and before I could ask anything, she led me down the stairs and into one of the various entryways. Behind yet another door, she stopped and led me down a short hall.

It occurred to me then why they hadn't bothered adding anyone else to my security detail. This place was a labyrinth, with doors and hallways all intersecting each other to the point where it felt like we were walking in a big circle. I'd never be able to find my way out from here. At least, not alone.

We stopped finally in a large chamber that echoed when the door closed behind us. A platform ran the length of the wall, with a long line of people sitting in tall-backed chairs. The man who sat in the middle was distinguishable from the rest, not only by a significantly larger, more ornate chair, but because he was easily the oldest. His head was bent, focused on something that lay on the table before him, but I still noticed the silver that threaded his hair. To his left a woman sat unflinching, her green eyes shooting daggers my way. Her vibrant red hair was pulled into a braid that draped over her shoulder, and her skin was so fair that in comparison with

the others at the table, she might have passed for a vampire. Certainly with that pinched look, she seemed far more likely a candidate than I.

Janna nodded for me to continue further into the room and then slipped away, leaving me to walk down the aisle toward the group of people at the end of the room. As I walked, I was aware that every eye turned toward me, so I straightened, walking with purpose and the remnants of dignity I still clung to, smoothing the skirt of my dress. It wasn't until I stopped just before them all that the man in the middle seat looked up at me.

In that moment, I realized what Janna had meant about the king being more tolerable than his sons, for I recognized his sparkling eyes, a feature he'd passed onto Janna. More astonishing, however, was the consideration there. It was not a look that burned with hatred, but one that appraised me with simple curiosity—one that seemed almost peaceful. "Well," he spoke, and to my surprise his voice was strong, not weak and rickety as his body would suggest. He smiled, though I couldn't decide if it was for his benefit or mine. "You must be our guest."

"Lilith." My voice was terse. I didn't like being referred to as a guest, as if it were commonplace to invite friends over for cocktails and then chain them up in the dark. For all I knew, they did.

"You possess the name of a demon." He informed me. "But surely not the qualities of one?"

I ignored the question, considering his gaunt face and relative pallor. Of course I knew I was the namesake of a legendary demon. Lilith the evil one, the demon who refused Adam, tempted Eve with the apple and birthed original sin. No doubt my father had hoped I would have a legacy as warped as hers.

Janna stood on the opposite side of me, with her hands clasped neatly before her. I noticed the gold bracelets glittering at her wrists, the understated way the boys stood together in attire that was an odd combination of formal and casual. They were royalty, though who had bestowed that title upon them, I couldn't imagine. It explained why they felt they could treat me as they did.

I danced around the question, uncomfortable with the presence of so many people watching me, their dark eyes passing judgement. The king

nodded, seemingly letting my silence answer his question. "What brought you here?"

For a moment, the question caught me off guard. "What brought me here?" In case he couldn't detect it in my voice, my face must have shown my confusion. Though there was nothing funny about the question, I laughed. "A werewolf. That one, actually." I jerked my thumb in the direction of his sons, waiting for the cynical look.

Instead, his eyes shifted and he looked at the men, standing together on the side of the room, observant. Julius' arms were crossed, the epitome of casual. James, however, looked uneasy, wringing his hands before him. "Why *did* you bring her here, James?"

His discomfort gave me a tiny bit of satisfaction. At least I wasn't the only one under fire; every eye in the room turned to James.

"Father?" James asked, confirming what I had suspected. But the fleeting triumph that his persecution had given me evaporated instantaneously. If he was the son of the King (whatever he was the King of), he most certainly wouldn't be held to this level of scrutiny long. Whatever he planned to do, no matter how sadistic, could probably be dismissed with a wave of his father's bony hand.

"Why did you bring an enemy into our home, James?" The king's voice was firm but fair, equal parts discipline and reason. But it didn't mean much to me as I realized just what this man was the King of.

I'd made a very grave mistake in thinking that the werewolf who'd attacked me would be alone in his curse, the favored son of a man who'd used his wealth and affluence to make excuses for him. This wasn't just a man with a dark secret that his family guarded. James, and I suspected Julius, were merely two werewolves of an entire coven, the children of the alpha...the king who sat at the forefront of the room.

I'd never particularly thought of werewolves as a viable threat, the way that most girls don't think they will ever be trapped by strangers or taken from an empty street. I simply hadn't considered that running into a werewolf was something that would ever happen to me, and yet in the past week I'd not only been cornered in a dark alley, but also kidnapped. I'd never thought I would have to worry about something so seemingly simple as that, no less something as unrealistic as running into a pack of

werewolves. I considered the people before me with a new respect born of intimidation, wondering if they were *all* werewolves, then looked to Janna and received affirmation. As quickly as the fear had set upon me, I shoved it back, refusing to let them notice my weakness.

"This creature...she's entirely different from anything we know." James spared me a quick glance, but his expression was unreadable as ever. "I brought her here, not as our enemy, but as a human."

"Please, James, she is a woman all the same. We will treat her with the same respect you dedicate to your mother and sister." The king's face was stoic, but he glanced my way before turning back to his son. He leaned forward. "Tell us what happened."

James looked uncomfortable under the weight of everybody's questioning eyes, but he stood straight. "When I bit her, it was...different." He looked at me as though he were trying to see through me, understand how I had deceived him. I didn't want to be transparent, least of all to him. "Though she had the very distinctive qualities of a vampire, it was immediately obvious that she was not." James didn't look away from me when he spoke, so I didn't either.

The king tilted his head to the side. "But we do not bring humans home."

James looked calmly at his father. "No." I could see the muscles locked in his jaw. He seemed composed but for that one tense gesture, which offered me an inordinate amount of satisfaction.

"Nor do we bring vampires home."

"No."

"So why, then, would you bring home a hybrid of the two?"

The way he questioned him was how I imagined scenes in court, which is what I gathered this was supposed to be. But who was the offender here? I was the prisoner, though I wasn't necessarily in the wrong. Did the King suspect as much, and would he admit it?

"I didn't know what to do." James admitted, casting me a side-long glance. "These are unusual circumstances. When a vampire is bitten by one of our own, they're not alive long enough to suffer any consequences. There's no precedent for a human being bitten by a werewolf, so I could only assume they would be brought back to be restored to health. Lilith is

neither, and so neither option seemed like the right one. Ultimately, I brought her here seeking the advice of the council."

"Neither option was the easy one." The king contested. "But there was a third choice, wasn't there?"

James was silent for a short spell, and then spoke hesitantly, as though he almost didn't dare give voice to his thoughts. "A third choice?"

"One that was much simpler, which would have saved you both from the mess you're in now."

"Which was what?" James asked seriously. It had a skeptical undercurrent, but I could tell his faith in his father was such that he believed his words to be gospel.

The king was in no rush to answer, apparently hoping his son would come up with the solution on his own. James waited calmly, but he didn't seem to know what his father was alluding to.

"You could have let me go," I suggested. For the first time, I wasn't scared of him, not when we were surrounded by all of these people, and not when the King was able to speak with such a sound mind. "You could have walked away."

James shook his head immediately, scoffing my idea. "That was never an option."

"Why not?" The King frowned.

James' face flushed. "How was I to walk away, when that was the most damaging choice of all? To leave a vampire running loose among humans, all the while changing into one of us with no sense of how to cope with it? It would have been not only dangerous, but also cruel."

"So you're sticking to that pathetic excuse?" I couldn't bite my tongue, even in front of all these people who were as likely to explode as live ammunition. "That you did this to help me?"

"I was backed into a corner," James turned to face me now. "I had to make a choice, and I did."

"I was the one backed into a corner! You didn't give me a chance to explain anything before you attacked."

"You were poised for attack..." James said, though he didn't seem too convinced now.

“Those men had me against the wall!” I practically shouted. My voice echoed through the expansive room, but I didn’t pause long enough to be embarrassed about that. I had no mind for anyone but James.

“Oh, enough!” The red-head slammed her hand upon the table and looked to the boys with those piercing eyes, although when fixed upon them her gaze seemed softer. “James, please tell the council, from the beginning, what you witnessed.”

James straightened a little. “Julius and I were on patrol when we heard a scuffle in the alley. What we saw was a couple of men with a girl pinned against the wall outside a bar. We saw a woman in danger, so we acted. But when we got closer, I realized she wasn’t a human. Julius sent the men running, and then cornered her before she could run too.” It sounded rehearsed, until his voice faltered. “I just...reacted. I bit her, because I thought it was a trap for those two humans.” He dared glance at me, looking rightfully ashamed, to catch the withering way I glared at him.

“And?” The King prodded.

“And as soon as I realized she wasn’t a threat, I released her. She wasn’t conscious, and Julius and I discussed what we should do. We decided it was wrong to leave a human in pain and dangerous to leave a vampire running wild, so we brought her here. I alerted Delilah, who tended to her immediate care, and then deposited her in the training block before seeking the advice of the council.”

The woman appraised him coolly, and then turned to his brother with a delicate raise of her eyebrow. “Julius?”

“Exactly as James said.”

“So then you were caught hunting on human territory.” The woman announced, cutting through me with that acidic stare. She harbored a very obvious dislike for me, one that was unrivaled except perhaps by Julius. And just like that, I realized this was their mother, or at the very least it was certainly Julius’ mother, judging by the shared narrow shape of their eyes and their mutual hatred for me.

The revelation made me angry. “Is anybody going to give me a chance to explain, or do we just condemn people without a fair trial these days?”

“Rest assured,” The Queen said in a bitter voice. “That this is not a trial. Your guilt has already been determined. What we have gathered for is the determination of your fate.”

My face burned with anger. “Your sons go out on the one night of the month designated for the Vampire’s hunt, and you’re calling my actions into question.”

“Nonsense.” She shook her head. “The night was over and so should the hunt have been. It was a new day.”

The stunned silence offered me no answer, but it gave me all the explanation I needed. The eyes of everyone in the room (save for the queens which were still trained on me with an intensity that would suggest she was trying to slice me in half) turned to the brothers.

“Lilith has a point,” The King said softly. “Perhaps you’d like to explain to the council, and to your parents, why you would both break something we hold as sacred, the simple laws that govern our existence?”

Julius looked at James, who remained impassive and silent. “No, not really.” He grinned, as though he could resort to a charming negligence.

“It wasn’t an option, Julius. James,” Though I didn’t know them or anything about their less-than-usual family dynamic, I could see in the way he looked at his son that he expected James’ honesty. “Why were you out so early?”

James looked at the ground for a few moments before finally opening his mouth to speak. It was Julius, however, who did the speaking. “We weren’t on official assignment,” Julius said, the first time I’d heard him speak in a formal tone. “I ran off to investigate a rash of disappearances downtown, and James chased after me. He dragged me out of the diner I’d been frequenting as part of my investigation, and we were headed home when we stumbled across that one.” He nodded at me, and as he did I remembered Larissa, telling me about the troublemaker named Julius. Perhaps there was some truth to this story he was telling now.

The King said nothing as he eyed his son thoughtfully for a few moments. The tension was so thick, a butter knife couldn’t have cut through it. A handsaw probably could have. He looked at me, thoughtfully. “So we have two offenses, of the same nature, each equally

severe. I see two choices. Both crimes can be acquitted due to the simple fact that they cancel each other out, or both crimes can be punished.” He turned to look at the other people sitting at the table with him, his council. They nodded their agreement. Only the King’ wife sat stoic. “Due to the violent nature of these events, I believe punishment would be excessive, and so we will absolve both violations. All those who would agree?”

Five hands went up at the table, including the king’s. Julius, off to the corner, raised his hand with a smile. The queen was the only one who didn’t move. She sat with her arms crossed, trying to burn a hole through me. But she was the focus of everyone’s attention. “Calista?” The King prompted. “We need a unanimous decision.”

The queen ground her teeth together, her eyes never leaving me as she raised her hand.

“Well, then, the offenses are dismissed. Today they’ve been put to rest and will not be mentioned again.”

Relief surged through me, though I didn’t know exactly what it meant. They didn’t believe me when I said I hadn’t been hunting, but they weren’t going to kill me for it. I wondered if this pardon only existed because it was the King’s own children who were embroiled in this mess.

“Lilith, you are a guest, despite the unhospitable first impression.” He smiled apologetically. “However, I hope you understand the gravitas of your situation with my son. Your paths have crossed, and no matter how inadvertent that was, I believe they are twined for a reason. Further, I hope you recognize that what James said was truth—it would be remiss of us to toss you out into the world, at least until you’ve learned control over what’s happening to you.” He looked at his son. “James, you will help her down this path as you would any of us. Should Lilith leave before she gains an understanding of the road ahead, you will share in the responsibility of whatever may come. Are we understood?”

James and I spoke up in perfect harmony, our incredulous tones almost melding into one. “What?”

The king managed to stay calm, unprovoked by our shared disbelief, and on my part, anger. “I see no reason to turn loose an unarmed girl in the woods, particularly one not yet eighteen, as I suspect you are not. There are

many changes in your future, Lilith, and until we've taught you how to handle them, it's best for us all that you stay here."

I was quiet while his words and their meaning resonated within me. And then my horror rose to the surface, too poignant to be restrained. "You can't keep me a prisoner!"

"Do you know what makes a prisoner, Lilith?" But he must have meant it to be rhetorical, because he answered, "It is a willingness to accept one's circumstances. You keep fighting those circumstances and you are no more a prisoner than I."

His words fell like splintered glass at my feet, fragments of my disbelief glimmering up at me. Was it a joke? He was making me stay, but he wanted me to fight? It made no sense. It was twisted.

"Please consider yourself a guest. You can have your own room, your own freedom, but I can't allow you to leave until we have the utmost confidence that your release will not pose a risk to others... or to yourself."

My throat threatened to close around the tears, but I fought them off. I was stuck there until I wasn't a risk to others...I suspected it meant until whenever they got the whim to kill me, or traded me for whatever they could get their hands on.

"And what exactly, do you think is going to keep me here?"

"I rather hope you'll learn to like it here." The King smiled, a sincere gesture.

"You're going to regret this," I warned. They were just words, with nothing to back them up, but I would not go out quietly.

"That's enough!" Julius said. His voice was clear and loud, firm enough to stop me in my tracks. I glanced at James, curious as to how he felt about all this, and saw the look that I undoubtedly wore on my face mirrored in his. He actually seemed in danger of being physically ill.

The King, pretending that my outburst had never happened, looked to the back of the room, his dark eyes indicating that his mind was in a seemingly far-off place. "Janna," He addressed his daughter with a smile and the light began to return to his eyes. I turned around to see Janna come forward, taking the spot next to me. James' father smiled, his eyes shifting between his daughter and me. "Will you show Lilith to her room?"

“Of course,” She smiled, as though it would be an honor. Her eyes turned on me and I almost stumbled backwards in the wake of their intensity, her disappointment, so drastically different from the gentle way she’d looked at me earlier. I was no longer fragile to her; something I’d done had provoked her, and while I couldn’t imagine what it had been, it gave me hope that I could exploit that. “Let’s go.”

I followed her from the room, glad to be away from the council, away from the king and his sons, away from the puppeteers pulling the strings of my life. But Janna’s anger put me on edge.

“I can tell you’re really thrilled with this decision,” Janna said. I was so wrapped up in my own thoughts that I almost didn’t recognize the sarcasm. But then, that’s not saying much since Janna didn’t seem to speak it fluently. I suspected this was uncharted territory for her.

“Delighted.” I muttered. I didn’t want to come right out and tell her I hated her brother for bringing this upon me, though she had to have known.

Janna stopped at a door on the right side of the hall, and I realized I’d been so busy cursing them all that I’d not kept track of which way we’d come from. My chance at a prison break was now lost, and I had only myself to blame. The door opened to reveal a decent-sized room, with a large bed and books set upon shelves built into the recesses of the walls. I stepped in automatically, and turned back to look at Janna.

“I know you’re not happy about this,” She said. “I assure you, neither are my brothers and my mother. The indiscretion is a blemish on their names. However, I have to ask that you please refrain from taking your anger out on my father. He is sick and does not need you trying to provoke him. If you need a punching bag, I’m right here. But if you ever go after my father like that...ever...I will turn *you* into the punching bag.”

It was a sentiment so drastically different from the girl she had been before that I wanted to laugh, but I couldn’t. Not until I knew which version was the real one. Her ferocity did catch me off guard, though not quite in the way she probably hoped. “He’s the one who told me to fight.” I reminded her. “And I will.” I meant it as a warning, but Janna’s cool eyes seemed unconcerned.

“I don’t think that’s what he meant.” She shook her head, tousling her long, glossy curls. Before I could ask for the translation, though, she shut the door. Seconds later the scrape of a lock provided all the clarification I needed. He could call me a guest, he could offer me a fancy room with a big bed and endless books, but he couldn’t deny what I was—their prisoner. And if he wanted a fight, I’d give him a fight.

CHAPTER FIVE

I don't think they'd expected complacency from me, judging from the look of mild surprise upon Janna's face as she unlocked my door hours later, to find me curled up into myself at the window seat, watching the sun sink away behind the trees. But I'd already explored the room and found absolutely nothing of any use to me. There was a spot on the wall where there had been a mirror once; apparently they'd removed anything I could have used as a weapon.

"Hey," Janna's soft voice seemed tentative. I wondered if she was embarrassed for losing her composure earlier. "My father requested your presence for dinner." She smiled, like that should make me feel better.

I crossed my arms and stared at her. Dining with them was about the last thing I wanted to do, closely preceded by starving and throwing myself through the second story window. But it was an opportunity to freedom, the only thing I'd ever wanted. And having been so close, only to have it snatched away, I realized my hunger for it had intensified. I'd do anything for it, including sitting at dinner with the family so that I could fool them into dropping their guard.

As Janna led me confidently and quietly through the halls, I recorded every turn in my brain. It was a sequence of lefts and rights through the house, down the stairs again, and into the same room where earlier I'd attempted my escape. The two heavy doors gleamed before me, and I wondered whether I should try again when Janna led me toward them. My heart raced, preparing my body for the adrenaline I would exert once those doors opened into the cool evening.

But as Janna opened them, my heart sank. The house once again gave way to brick, going from a palatial home to an area reminiscent of a dungeon. Janna informed me to watch my step, and it was hard not to feel a growing sense of dread as we moved into an area that was very obviously below ground. My lungs tightened painfully at that knowledge, but I tried not to let it affect me. When I was young, I'd spent hours running through the tunnels and close hallways at my father's home, and I'd been okay then. Of course, back then I hadn't been surrounded by werewolves...

Foolish Lilith. I followed her through the darkness. But as suddenly as it had been black on this side of the door, light flickered in the distance, bringing with it the promise of warmth. Unwilling to drop my defenses, I followed her warily until the dark passage we'd come through was nothing but a memory in the distance. Here, the walls were decorated with fire, beautiful bursts of flame that illuminated the rich tapestries hanging by them. If the home above us had been palatial, this place was the epitome of a castle.

It was nearly archaic, the way that the torches burned in their sconces every few paces, but they were gorgeous all the same, their warmth offering a stark contrast to the dark halls I was accustomed to. I was so entranced by the unexpected guise of comfort that I'd forgotten to keep track of our movement until it ceased, so that we stood before a set of doors that matched the ones we'd come through. Janna appraised me, with something like sympathy in those warm eyes of hers. Fear seized my heart just as she threw the doors open, my mind reeling with thoughts of being made into their dinner, of having an apple shoved in my mouth and being roasted alive.

Instead, hundreds of eyes turned to look at me. The room buzzed with excitement; a young girl elbowed her mother until she looked up where her daughter was pointing at me, and a boy leaned into his father to whisper. I wavered under the surprising weight of it all, suddenly dizzy. Like an anvil had been shoved onto my chest, the surprise forced my breath out of tight lungs.

Janna didn't hesitate to usher me down the center aisle as necks craned to capture a glimpse of us, following our path all the way to the front of the room where a long, horizontal table barred us from moving any further. At the table sat the people I'd come to fear: James and Julius, side by side. To James' right sat the King, and to Julius' left sat the queen, her cold eyes trained on me. James stood, and I forced myself still as he approached, unwilling to betray any signs of fear. I didn't want James to see them, to know he had the upper hand, and certainly not with an audience.

I nearly winced as he extended his hand, palm up. In his eyes there was an expression I couldn't determine. He was generally unreadable, and that made me nervous. Xian had been like that for the most part too, and

yet he could snap in an instant. The entire room watched me still, and I noticed Janna had moved away to take up an empty chair beside her mother. I waited for him to say something, anything, but he didn't. *You don't bother me.* It was a lie I was attempting to convince myself of, but maybe if I fooled everyone else first...

I placed my hand in his. The smallest semblance of a smile found its way to his mouth and he led me behind the table, where an empty seat had opened as the King had moved one over, so that he now sat at my right. Hesitant, I assumed his vacated place, all too aware of the uncomfortable silence that had settled around the room.

The King nodded, and from doors on either side of our table people issued, bearing with them silver trays loaded with meats and cheese, fruit and bread, vegetables of such bright colors they seemed almost unnatural and yet bizarrely enticing. A man appeared between James and I, placing a platter before us. My skin stood at attention as he withdrew, brushing very lightly against my arm. A woman appeared to take his place, setting before us a basket of bread, and smiling joyfully at me.

Overwhelmed, I turned to James to ask him anything, when a girl who couldn't have been much older than myself popped between us with a decanter, filling the crystal glasses that sat on either side of me with an amber liquid I recognized as wine. To my other side, a younger girl set another drink before me, in a silver goblet. That girl disappeared in the next instant, and I turned in time to see the first young woman as she pulled back to retreat. Her hand slipped very casually over my full goblet, sending it careening to the table so that its contents spilled on my lap. I jumped up and had a napkin shoved into my hand in the next instant. "Oops," Said the girl who'd knocked over the goblet, though she sounded not the least bit apologetic. She seemed to smirk as she turned away.

Gratefully accepting the napkin, I dabbed at the clothes I'd borrowed from Janna earlier that day, and became aware of the red stain that spread over the white cloth in my hand. The warmth was what startled me most, and shaking, I realized what I'd been saturated with. Nausea rolled through my stomach at the smell. Blood.

The King righted my overturned goblet and turned to the girl, issuing a very kind request for another. I stared at the napkin a moment, before coming to attention in time to place my hand on the King's. "No." I

told him, speaking for the first time in hours, causing my voice to crack. “Please.” I added, with an imperceptible shake of my head. The girl who’d caused the mess looked to the King for confirmation, and then disappeared when he nodded his agreement.

I noticed then that I’d still been under surveillance, knowledge that made me feel even more uneasy. In the wake of that mess, though, the silence had been transformed into a buzz of noise as several conversations had erupted. I released the breath I’d been unconsciously holding, and took my seat again. James handed me his napkin, and I accepted it with a murmured ‘thanks’, pulling the last of the wet stain from the skirt.

Dinner commenced, and everybody seemed to be swallowed into their own conversations, leaving me to sit awkwardly at the forefront of the room, on the receiving end of curious glances. I heard Janna begin talking to her mother about something she’d seen in town a few days ago, and the King discussing with a man a seat or two over from him how the weather was perfect. I simply stared at the food before me, unwilling and unable to eat after feeling the blood on my hands. Though I’d ruined a few crisp linen napkins, they were still tinted red. James leaned into me so that nobody could see what he was about to say.

“You know, we don’t normally eat like this...all picking off the same trays.” He gestured at the slices of meat that had been carved up on a gleaming platter. “It’s for your benefit. We wanted you to know that the food is good. Untainted.” He added.

I turned, looking at him blankly. His dark eyes looked deceptively kind, and the planes of his face were not so rigid that he looked angry, just uncertain. The smile that he offered me was charming in spite of its faltering habit. But I knew better than to be taken in by deceitful good looks. “What is this?”

“Dinner,” he said simply. “A good one too.”

“That’s not what I meant.” I hissed. “Why are you guys doing this? What do you want from me?”

James watched me for a moment, contemplating his answer. “We can discuss this at length later.” And without waiting for an answer, he turned to his brother and began to speak with him on something I did not care to listen to.

The king watched me a minute, then leaned in. When he did, I realized that up close, the sickness Janna had mentioned was evident. It was no wonder she had taken up arms to defend him—he looked fragile. His face was pale, translucent like paper and stretched too tight. Under his eyes were dark circles, like bruises, and though they weren't prominent, I could see the way that wrinkles did cover his face...fine little things, like fault lines under his skin. While he looked feeble, I couldn't say he looked particularly old. At least, not as old as he truly was. I felt inclined to like him, for reasons I couldn't explain. But that wasn't going to stop me from letting him know how I really felt.

"I must confess, the blood was a test. I had to make sure my people were safe in your presence. Having it spilled on you...well, that was, I suspect, a bit of creative liberty." I looked down at the table where the discarded napkins sat at the edge of my empty plate. "You passed, by the way."

From the corner of my eye, I saw that Janna was embroiled in a conversation which required the emphatic use of her hands. She was far too distracted to notice me.

"I deserve answers."

"You do," he nodded. "But I cannot give them to you. James has tied your fates together...I'm afraid it's up to him to disclose the nature of your future."

My eyes narrowed with suspicion. He wouldn't tell me what I wanted? Fine. "I'll play this game, whatever it is, and I will win."

The king gave me an undeniable smile. "I don't doubt you will."

I suffered through dinner and dessert in the same manner, and when my misery was over, Janna led me back to my room. But instead of dropping me off, she opened the door and followed me in, perching herself on the edge of the bed while I resumed my seat at the window. I couldn't help but watch her. Something about the look in her eye, the way she sat there as if she'd been here millions of times before, had me intrigued. "Delilah," She said suddenly, looking up at me. "She's the one who spilled that goblet on you at dinner." I didn't know why she was bothering to tell me this, as if Delilah had been anything more than a thorn in my side after

my recent experience. But Janna wasn't done. "She's a bit...malicious. And she's always had a thing for James. I can't say she is evil incarnate, but if she were on fire I'd try to put it out with lighter fluid." She grimaced at her own words. "That was cruel. Delilah is actually the one who took care of you when James first brought you here. The blood was a test, to prove whether we could trust you. I'm sure she hoped you would fail and that's why she took it upon herself to spill it everywhere. The joke is on her, though, because you passed with flying colors." Janna smiled then, as if that should excite me.

I clenched my jaw together, still too angry to speak without potentially screaming. And screaming would be counterproductive. Janna seemed to realize I wasn't going to offer her anything in return, and so she turned and let herself out of the room.

They were worried about testing me and trying to find out if I could be trusted, but they didn't seem to realize they'd given me no reason to trust them. Sure, they didn't poison the food, but the way the pain in my shoulder pulsed through my veins and echoed in my temples now that I was alone with it, I almost wished they had.

I collapsed face down on the bed and drifted to sleep in the next minute, too exhausted to even notice that I'd never heard the sound of that lock scraping closed.

CHAPTER SIX

When I woke up after just a few hours of sleep, it was of my own accord, my body restless with sleep, the same feelings coiled tightly within me like a snake waiting to strike. I considered the pale purple walls, a false advertisement of comfort, and my anger only grew. With it grew my need to escape before they drove me mad with their attempts at shoving their brand of normalcy down my throat.

I could break the glass of that window right now and jump, but when I looked out at the ground below me, my chest seized with the realization that I was higher up than I'd initially thought. A blur of colorful flowers and thick thorns glared up at me; The trees in the distance looked like nothing more than splotches of paint in an impressionist work. Stepping back, I took a deep breath. Heights had never really agreed with me.

There was not much that I could do, short of bursting through the window and potentially plunging to my death. It wasn't the worst option, but there was still a fire within me, still hope that I could escape these people and their mysterious plan for me. My eyes fell upon the door; it was a long shot, but maybe I could summon just enough rage to break through the wood or wrench the handle off. Never had I had great occasion to test myself, and even I didn't know the limits of my strength. It was silly, perhaps, but what did I stand to gain by sitting cross-legged on the bed and dreaming of my revenge?

I thought of James' teeth sinking into my skin, the fear, the helplessness I'd felt at his hand—and with all the force I could manage threw myself into the door. Solid as doors usually are, I bounced back, breathless, and clutched my shoulder, which I'd foolishly used to guide my barrage. One deep, steadyng breath later I thought of Xian, of his vow that he'd never let me go, of the thousands of lies and broken promises and the words that had cut like knives. My jaw set, I grabbed the handle, braced one hand on the frame, and wrenched.

The door flew open, knocking me back a little. The giddy realization that Janna had forgotten to lock me in made me feel immediately

lighter. I gathered myself in time to get a peek of the empty hallway before creeping over the threshold. I hadn't expected to make it this far; how I'd find my way out of the house, particularly without being detected, I hadn't considered. But if I ran into anyone who tried to stop me, I'd fight...tooth, fang, and nail.

The house was eerily silent as I made my way down the corkscrew staircase, my bare feet muffling the sound of my movement. I'd reacted so quickly I hadn't thought to grab my shoes, and while running outside barefoot would hardly be fun, I couldn't have escaped the house without my clunky riding boots drawing attention anyhow.

When I landed on the ground floor, there was nobody to be found. But there were so many doors, which anybody could emerge from at any given moment. I had to pick one and run for it or risk failure.

Every door looked the same except for the one with the superior archway which lead to the hall I wanted to avoid, the dead-end where I'd been a dinner guest. The quickening of my pulse warned me to hurry up and choose, but I did not know where to go. Bemoaning my inability to stay awake during my capture, I threw caution to the wind and chose a door directly across the room, my feet sliding across the cold marble.

I was assaulted immediately after tearing it open with a violent gust of wind, and looking up, saw a fork of lightning flick through the air. If that and the earthy scent in the air were any indication, it was going to pour, and I couldn't decide whether this would hinder me or make it easier to evade re-capture. *It's not too late to turn around and wait for a better opportunity*, I told myself. But if I turned back now I wouldn't be able to forgive myself. This opportunity may not present itself again.

The entire property was hedged in by tall shrubs that reached so high they formed a sort of wall separating me from the world beyond them. Limestone carved a path before me, lined by the same hedges on either side, and it seemed the most obvious way out. Narrow as it was, it would not offer me much chance to hide should I run into someone, and I couldn't tell how long it went on or where exactly it let out, but it was all I had. I took a deep breath, gathering my nerve, and a step, and then stopped short.

The arm that caught my wrist was firm, but not excruciatingly so. I spun to see James and then promptly swung at him. Before it could connect with his face, he caught that wrist too, pinioned beneath a steely grip.

Though his face betrayed no emotion, when he spoke he didn't sound malicious. Just tired.

"Where do you think you're going to go, Lilith?"

"Get your hands off of me!" I yelled, trying to jerk out of his grasp. But it was unyielding.

James smiled, but it was sad and held the promise of disappointment. "I can't let you go yet."

"What are you going to do to stop me?" Malevolence seeped into my voice, pouring out as a taunt. If I'd taunted Julius like this, he'd probably kill me plain and simple. Xian would silence me at any cost. But James? I didn't know much about him, but I wasn't so oblivious that I didn't realize he was a rogue asset with everything to lose. He refused to kill me because of his morals, he refused to set me free because of his morals, and he refused to keep me because of his morals. He was backed into a wall with nowhere to go, and so any threat he could offer up was empty; we both knew it.

"Whatever I have to." It was a warning, but it lacked conviction. Despite the words, James looked principled as ever.

I tore one wrist free and glared at him, wishing that my hatred could burn a hole right through him. "Try me." I challenged, my chest swelling with arrogance. "I can do or say anything I want because it doesn't matter what sort of punishment you come up with. Nothing could be worse."

James released my other wrist as though I repulsed him. "Worse than what?" He growled. I had hoped to touch a nerve—apparently I'd just torn one open. "Than being stuck here, being clothed and fed and having a roof over your head?"

Whatever possessed me to tell him what I did, I'll never know. The truth was my only hope of salvation; perhaps the fact that I hadn't wanted the life I'd been given would grant me some sort of clemency in whatever followed this life. Besides, he didn't get to act like he was offering me sanctuary. "Nothing could be worse than the seventeen years I've already wasted away. Just go ahead and try."

"Oh," James choked on a cold, hard laugh. "You mean that nothing could be worse than returning you to your life of excess, where sin practically hangs in the air you breathe? Nothing could be worse for you

than getting drunk all day and sleeping with every guy you see and draining humans of their blood just because you think it's fun to watch the life slip out of their eyes? Don't insult my intelligence."

He pressed me into the stone wall, and his words cut so deep that I didn't even feel the exterior of the house scraping my arms. "You have no idea what you're talking about!" My teeth ground around the hatred that was simmering within me. His assumptions infuriated me more than anything else that had transpired between us. "You think you know me because of what I am? You're a child, sheltered by a life of promise. You can think whatever you want of me, but don't you *ever* tell me how I feel about that part of my life!"

He fixed me with an odd look that I couldn't quite place, something between sympathy and disgust. "I know more than you might imagine. More than I care to know, if we're being perfectly honest."

"Oh yeah?" The claim provoked me. "Prove it."

James laughed, and found his grip on me again; Fingers snug around my wrist, he began to pull me into the house. Defiance burned in my heart, reflected in the eyes I stared smugly at him with. I hadn't come this far to give up now, and so I dug my heels into the dry stone. When he realized he'd have to drag me the whole way, something flickered within him, and I flinched away as his arms wrapped around me and I was thrown unceremoniously over his shoulder. "Let me go!" I screamed in his ear. I kicked my legs and pounded my fists into his strong back, but it was useless.

My screams echoed all throughout the creamy marble walls. I spewed a litany of expletives and made every reference I could think of to call him a dirty dog, a wild beast, a worthless, entitled little boy. A few people poked their heads through the doors, wide-eyed as they watched us wordlessly. No one seemed bothered by my plight, least of all James. Where we were going was of no consequence, because I flailed until we reached a room where he locked the door and threw me down in a chair. I scrambled into myself, ready for the fight, but he turned his back on me and crossed to the wall, where buttery curtains draped the distance. Looking around, I realized the whole room was covered with them, floor to ceiling. When he drew them back I expected the evening to press in around us, but what it unveiled was a wall of books. Floor to ceiling, every little nook was

full of them, their proud spines arranged in a multitude of jewel tones, embossed words glancing out at me with the hazy moonlight that poured in from the oculus upon the ceiling. This room on the main floor of the house easily stretched the height of the second story.

I watched, breathless and confused, as he drew back all the curtains, revealing a study so vast, so loaded with books, that I felt they would swallow me—not that I minded. “Consider yourself lucky,” James said, disrupting my awed speculation. “This is the library of Eden, a place where no human, no vampire, and very few werewolves have ever been.”

I swallowed the lump that had formed in my throat and tried breathing around it as the few things I’d ever heard about Eden tried to come to me. All my anger had dissipated. I didn’t have a place for it when surrounded by such exquisite beauty. “It’s amazing.” I said, nearly breathless. I wanted to examine the shelves more closely, to pluck a book from them and dive right in head first. But I couldn’t stave off the curiosity as to why James would bring me here, unless he figured it was so well isolated he could kill me without a witness.

It was as though he could read my mind. “You want to know what I know? You’re here to learn.”

I cautiously crossed to him with my arms folded into my chest, and we stood several feet apart at the only window, looking out into the night. I hadn’t realized there was water nearby, but I could see it clearly from my vantage point, an entire ocean spanning the coast. I wouldn’t have been able to see it but for the waves that crashed against the shore, large and wild, provoked by the rolling storm clouds above. The chaos of the sea fed off the chaos of the sky, and the sky fed the waves in turn.

I could have stared at the assault on the shore for hours; it filled me with an unwarranted sense of peace, as if I were lending the waves all of the pent up fury from my own life. James drew my attention to a large gold-framed painting on the next wall, around which the bookshelves continued uninterrupted. The canvas work was made from oil paints in the vein of baroque art and easily stretched the width of my arm span. It was divided into three different panels, each one distinctive in its own color scheme: white, blue, and red. The one that caught my attention was the blue panel in the center—the airy afternoon light was clean and simple. Men and women clustered around a table in the midst of a lush garden, seemingly in the

middle of a meal. It exuded tranquility and innocence. The panel to the left of it was white, but it was hardly boring. The same garden was the subject of the section, but this depiction was slightly less airy and more realistic. More earthy. It depicted a set of wolves, sitting on either side of the table, facing us with wise-looking eyes. The humans at the table did not seem to be aware of their presence.

The last panel was the most contrasting, lit up with shades of orange and offering a much different scene. The humans that had been dining carelessly in the meadow now lay sprawled out across the length of canvas, little pools of red encasing their grotesquely arranged bodies. A figure in a cape knelt at the neck of a fallen man. I didn't need that tell-tale cape to know what that figure was.

"We are enemies, Lilith." James cast a brief glance at me. "You and I. Not by our own discretion or the choices of our ancestors, but by the very birth of our races."

I looked at him with quiet disdain, secretly imploring him to state something other than the obvious. James shook his head the slightest bit, so that I wasn't even quite sure that the gesture had really happened. "We are enemies because of our instincts...blood and bones. Since the first demon was created, the human legacy was put in jeopardy. The vampires, feeding upon the blood of the innocent, were a plague of Biblical proportions, which could be countered only by a *protection* of Biblical proportions. The Creator made my kind to protect the humans from the demons and to influence the humans to do good."

"Yes, yes, werewolves are good, vampires are bad." I rolled my eyes, and found the painting again before muttering, "I know."

To my surprise, James was shaking his head at me again. "It wasn't pretty. The resentment that sprang up from this fueled the first war. The vampires would not heed our requests, causing the war between angels and demons, werewolves and vampires, which lasted nearly a century. In that time, the humans began to pick up on what was happening, and the truth became hard to hide. They thought us all to be evil creatures because they did not know the difference between a vampire and a werewolf. They couldn't comprehend the threat a vampire posed, nor could they understand the protection we meant to offer. The humans began to hunt the vampires and werewolves alike. But the Creator was unhappy, for the humans were

harming themselves even more by coming after us, and so he sent down his angels to convince the world that we were not real, not vampires or werewolves or anything other than humans. Since a majority of the town had been turned or attacked by that point, the remaining few families made it a point to ignore our existence. They were told that if they denied our existence, we would disappear. They've been looking the other way all this time.

"Since the day of that accord, we have been bound by similar conventions. We do not live together happily, but we do coexist for the sake of the humans. We remain their vigilant guardians, protecting them from the devils children. Peace exists only because the humans do not believe in us. The cave paintings, the stories passed from ear to ear, the things that humans dismiss as legend...the fancies of a fool with far too much time on his hands. The ignorance of the humans is their shield."

"Your being in town that day that I bit you threatened all of that security, all of their hard-won peace. You put lives in danger. I struck to defend the humans because I thought you were striking to destroy them. Your mere presence could have unveiled the truth and caused irrevocable damage."

Understanding dawned on me as I took in the picture again. The first panel was before the vampires came, when it was just the humans on Earth and God in Heaven with his angels. The second panel was life as it was today, with humans ignorant of the existence of werewolves and vampires. The third panel was what would happen if the humans found out the truth. But something to do with the last panel struck me as wrong.

"And where are the wolves then?" I gestured to the panel in question. "In the human's time of need, the wolves are nowhere to be seen."

"The wolves have been hunted." James' face was perhaps more grim than his voice. "Humans and vampires alike have pursued them, killed them, and chased them away. With the wolves gone, the humans will fall prey to the vampires and the Creator will have been failed by his children, while Satan's spawn are left to take the world as their own."

I re-crossed my arms, trying not to feel so defensive despite the contradicting meaning of my body language. I felt suddenly like he wasn't warning me so much as foreshadowing something dark...an apocalypse of

sorts. “I know that since we are born enemies you feel very strongly about your level of hatred for me, but I think ‘spawn of Satan’ might be just a tad melodramatic.”

James shook his head. “Do you know nothing of your own history?” When I transfixed him with a blank look, he continued. “The creator made humans, and he so loved them that he gave his only begotten son to die upon the cross for them.” It was a quote I’d heard somewhere before, though I couldn’t have possibly figured out where from. “The angels did not appreciate the favoritism he bestowed upon the humans, who were not to the angels but weak, insipid things. Lucifer, one of the most prestigious of arch angels, led the revolt that ensued. For that, he was cast from Paradise.”

“I’ve heard this story before.”

James continued without sparing me a second glance. “With his pride injured, alone, full of hate and rage he kidnapped Lilith, the first wife of Adam. He fed her the blood of babies, until she was twisted, a creature surviving only on blood, helpless against him. The union of Lilith and Lucifer gave life to creatures of the night. Her beauty spread among her offspring, camouflaging their ugly nature from the humans.” James looked at me sharply, like he meant to cut glass with that stare. “Unfortunately, they also inherited Lilith’s desire for blood and Lucifer’s hunger for violence. They thirst for it, for it provides the vengeance Lucifer has sought for thousands of years.”

By the time he fell silent my stomach was in knots. I tried to grasp hold of any of it, but it didn’t make sense. I didn’t believe in God, or as James called Him, a Creator. I also had never really considered the devil. Perhaps James was lying, or maybe he was only telling me what had been told to him, but it couldn’t be true. Because if it was, then I was one step closer to figuring out who I was. Unfortunately, it would also bring me one step further from the person that I wanted to be...little more than a half-baked notion of decency.

I didn’t want to believe it, but a part of me did. Either it was truth or a very well-constructed story. Regardless, I couldn’t deny one thing—it made sense. It explained the gravitational pull I’d always felt toward them, the reason I’d never been able to leave my father or Xian despite their flaws. It explained why, despite my best intentions, I couldn’t help the

occasionally vengeful thought. It explained the voice that seemed to invade my brain sometimes with thoughts so sinister I'd never lay claim to them. It explained why even though I'd always tried to be different from them, good, I'd always known there was something instinctual within me that couldn't be fought. Something evil.

It was a bitter pill to swallow. It caught in my throat 'til my face was red with the effort to breathe normally.

"*Everything* depends on their blissful ignorance." James said, though he'd already made his point.

I turned away from him, not wanting to allow him to see the horror undoubtedly haunting my eyes, dancing across my face. "Lilith?" James' voice stopped me before I could get far. I paused, bracing myself for whatever else he could throw at me. After that, not much could have phased me, but that didn't stop him from trying. "Next time you want to challenge my intentions...don't."

CHAPTER SEVEN

I'd always felt like I was moderately intelligent, particularly for someone who had taught herself basically everything she knew. But as I walked through the halls and my footsteps echoed around me, I felt not only alone and lost, but also like I'd done something very foolish.

Trying to run might not have been stupid if it had worked, but seeing as it hadn't, I'd only made matters worse. Now James knew to watch me more closely. Now he knew that he couldn't trust me.

I couldn't try to run again while the failure of that attempt was fresh. I had to wait for exactly the right moment to strike. The idea didn't appeal to me in the slightest, but it was my only chance... my only choice. Besides, James was no fool. He'd meant to prove a point and he had. I don't think even he had expected his story to affect me on such a deep level, but it had and I imagined it only made him all the more pleased with himself. Not only had he proven to me that he knew more than I knew about myself—not as a person, but as a whole—but he'd also managed to crush whatever hope I'd had of being something more.

Those thoughts consumed me so that I didn't realize I was no longer alone in the hall. Julius caught up to me in a few powerful strides and used his shoulder to lead me into the wall. Caught off guard, I turned and he stepped close to me, his dark eyes inquisitive. He didn't say anything, just studied me for a few long seconds. I was so caught off guard that I didn't immediately shake him loose. "What is it about you?" He muttered. His words brought me back to reality, and I pulled out of his reach, rubbing my shoulder absently.

I glared at him. "I don't know what you mean."

"You're immune..." His voice was nothing but raw curiosity; His eyes roved over me as if my demeanor might offer him some sort of clue. "How do you do it?"

"I don't *do* anything."

Julius laughed, but it sounded contrived. His eyes lingered on mine for a minute, and then they dropped to my collarbone. "You've been bitten

countless times, and yet you've never transformed...not really. It's like something *stopped* it."

My mouth went dry; this wasn't a discussion I wanted to have, particularly with him. I didn't even understand it myself—it wasn't as though hashing it out with an arrogant stranger would make it seem any less of a curse. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"Don't lie to me!" He pressed closer and wrapped a hand around the top of my arm. It was firm, but not painfully so. Desperation danced in his eyes, made all the more wild by the torches that danced in their sconces every couple of paces. "What did you do to stop it?"

I set my jaw, refusing to offer him anything. He appeared to be searching my soul for whatever it was that he wanted.

"Julius." James' voice broke the tension, though he spoke it as a warning.

Julius gritted his teeth, but took a step back without turning his head from me. "You aren't the least bit curious to know how she's doing it?"

James looked genuinely confused. "What exactly is she doing?"

"It's what she isn't doing," Julius glanced at me. "She was bitten and she isn't even changing."

"It's too early to know that," James dismissed. "Let it go, Julius."

"Let it go? No, I don't think I will. She could change *everything*, and you want me to sit on my hands and do nothing about it?"

"I'm sorry." At first I thought he was talking to me, trying to excuse his brother's errant behavior, and then I realized he was apologizing to Julius. He looked at me and nodded. I didn't want to walk with him, but I was still lost and wanted to put as much distance as possible between Julius and I.

"I will figure it out you know," Julius called after me, his voice echoing in the barren corridor. "Whatever it takes."

Knowledge was power. And Julius thought I had a power that I did not...something told me he really would do whatever he could to expose that. "What was he talking about?" I asked.

James didn't offer me a glance. Instead, he looked straight ahead like he hadn't heard. So I asked again. "It's nothing that concerns you."

He said.

“It doesn’t concern me?” I laughed. “Really? Cause it sounded like it was all about me.”

He was silent until we got to my door and I went inside. I made to slam it in his face, but he reacted quickly, sliding his foot between the doorjamb and stepping inside. As assertive as that action was, he stood in the doorway still, looking around with a tentative, almost fearful hesitance. He seemed to realize I wasn’t going to be inviting him in, so he took a small step forward. “Are you alright?” He asked, after a few moments of my glaring silence.

I might have laughed, but instead I muttered, “Just peachy.”

James seemed unperturbed by my sarcasm. “I’ve been thinking about what you said...how I don’t know you. I’d like to know how to help you, though.” His words made me suspicious, but he spoke calmly. “You said that nothing could be worse than what you came from. I assumed you’d chosen that lifestyle, as most do, but I need to know...were you turned against your will or did you want to become a vampire?”

I appraised him stonily. His dark hair fell in soft-looking little waves, like it were just tousled from the beach. His eyes, despite looking tired, were level. Everything about him was calm, at ease. I didn’t have a mirror to glance at, but I suspected I looked like the total opposite. I was the total opposite, the very antithesis of everything he stood for. But I wasn’t above giving him a taste of his own medication.

I sat on the bed and crossed my arms, pointedly looking away from him.

“Lilith, just tell me.” His voice bordered on a plea. It was only a small satisfaction.

“Oh, now you want to talk? You expect me to tell you every little thing that you want to know and then refuse to tell me anything?”

“Please,” He sounded exhausted. “I know you don’t understand but I need to know if that was the life you asked for?”

“I don’t know if your sense of entitlement comes from the fact that your father is the King or the fact that you’re just selfish, but I assure you, the world isn’t yours for the taking. I am not yours for the taking.”

Defiance made my words sound bitter and juvenile, particularly considering that I was kind of still at his whim.

James didn't so much as blink. He exercised careful keep of his emotions, which I found all the more infuriating. I couldn't tell if my words were having the effect I sought. "If you were forced into that life, it changes things."

"Oh," I laughed. "Does it? Does it change the fact that I'll never get that time back, never be able to forget what it was like?"

"So you wanted to be turned." James concluded. The insinuation disgusted me, which is why I was provoked enough to even answer him.

"I didn't *choose* anything. I was never offered a choice, not about what I am or what I hope to be." I looked away, because finally, I got a reaction from him. But it wasn't one I liked. It was something unreadable with maybe a touch of pity. "Children don't understand that they're different until everyone tries to make them the same. I can't be turned, for reasons that I may never know. Be sure and tell that to your brother."

"You can tell me," James said, coming to sit on the bed by me. He kept his distance, whether because he was scared of me or repulsed by me. "Lilith, if they held you there against your will, just say it and I will make them pay."

"Pay?" I raised an eyebrow. "For what, not suffocating me when I was a baby? I was born this way."

That, at least, stunned him to silence—a brief but beautiful silence, in which he looked the way I must have earlier, trying to understand the depth of this information. "You were born...to a vampire?" I continued to glare at him. "That's impossible."

"Tell that to my father." I snapped. "By the way, he's the King over there, so if you want to play that card, I will too." James blinked a few times while he considered it and then nodded. He stood to go, but then seemed to remember something. I tensed when he reached into the pocket of his dark jeans. A small white pill was pinched between his fingers. "I noticed earlier that you were holding your shoulder. This should help with the pain."

I didn't take it. I didn't want to get close enough to him to take it. So he set it on the dresser and left in the next instant.

I stared at it for a while, wondering just what it was and if it would really get rid of the pain. It might, true to his word, but it might also kill me. It was a gamble. The pain was intermittent, sometimes non-existent and then excruciating the next minute. I decided not to take it—until I woke in the middle of the night and had to crawl to the dresser because I was so far doubled over. I didn't understand what was happening, why the pain still curdled my blood. I didn't contemplate it long. As soon as I popped the pill in my mouth, there was the promise of relief, though however fleeting I didn't know.

CHAPTER EIGHT

In my dream, I'd been running for forever, my body so tired it could not move another inch. The woods pressed around me, a cloying blur of greenery. The scent of wet, turned up soil got caught in my lungs until it was too hard to breathe. I collapsed to the ground, and moments later he was there. Xian, at his knees by my side, was shaking me so that my head rattled to the ground and lay there limp when he stopped. Tears formed in his eyes, gathering like storm clouds, so foreign and exotic they possessed a beauty entirely their own. And as I awoke, reveling in his anguish, I was happy. Until I noticed James shaking me, his knees upon the bed, braced on either side of me.

His face was stricken with panic, which was an interesting look for him, but I barely had a moment to enjoy it before I felt his touch searing into my skin. I jumped back so hard I hit my head on the elegantly carved headboard. "What are you doing?" I demanded, drawing the blanket back with me, though the top I'd worn to bed was arguably less revealing than the dress Janna had forced me into the other day.

"Trying to wake you. Do you always sleep like the dead?" He shook his head, his voice carrying an accusation as mine had.

"Do you always climb on top of sleeping girls?" I fired back. His face was momentarily confused, and then when he took me in, as far as I could get away from him, his face turned a funny shade of scarlet. He jumped to his feet and brushed his hands over his jeans like that would get the feeling of my skin off of him.

"I brought you these," James offered me a very neatly folded stack of clothing. I recognized my own jeans, scoured clean of any blood or dirt, and a fresh shirt.

I accepted the bundle without letting my guard down, glaring at him.

"You'll want to get dressed." His voice was brusque. "We have a long journey ahead of us." I looked up at him, my eyes speaking the questions my tongue could not. "You're going home."

I knew, of course, that I wasn't just going to walk through the doors, hug my father, and ask for forgiveness. First, my pride was too great to be swallowed, and I couldn't admit that running away had been wrong, even in spite of my current circumstance. Secondly, even if I did, father would never allow it. He had a reputation to uphold—a reputation that did not favor the weak of will any more than it favored traitors, both of which I was in his eyes. No one affronted Father and got away unscathed, not even his own daughter. In fact, he was more likely to punish me to set an example. If he could kill his own flesh and blood for betraying him, what would he do to the rest of them?

The prospect of going back, exchanging one captor for the next, did not excite me. In fact, it wasn't until we reached the foot of the stairs facing those two huge doors that the shock dissipated enough for the slightest bit of emotion to take root. Julius stood there, waiting to greet us with a heavy chain in his hands, the shackles hanging loose at either end of it. He smiled when he saw me, but it was not a smile that spoke of happiness, rather one that spoke of a threat. *We're not done yet,* He seemed to be saying. In spite of myself, a thought arose in the back of my head, making me wonder which was the lesser of two evils: Xian, who had been killing me slowly for the past few years or Julius who seemed like he would very much enjoy ripping my throat out?

Julius looked positively chipper as he came closer to me, the shackles outstretched. "Consider it insurance," He winked.

Just like that, it made sense. Of course they weren't simply returning me home on a good deed, like a wallet to the lost and found. I was a hostage. James' words came drifting back to me: *Why kill you yet?* He'd asked. *I have a plan for you.*

I should have seen this coming; after all, father had amassed quite a wealth over the years. Rumor had it that he had in his possession an arsenal of treasures, relics from the world over, and priceless texts. From the moment that James had decided not to kill me, he'd probably been considering using me for ransom. He'd had reason to believe I was special, and then I'd gone last night and told him my father was the one who called the shots amongst the vampires.

Father would never have listened to them if they had anybody else, and they would have killed any other vampire. But my status of mixed breed—they thought it made me an exception...it had certainly been exceptional enough for James not to finish what he started outside the diner. They'd falsely assumed me to be valuable to the vampires, when in fact it was the very opposite. Because I was different from them, they saw me as worthless.

Now I knew why Julius had threatened me for answers, why he'd been so desperate to know my secret. He knew that they'd be returning me, that his chances at having the knowledge he desired was slipping away, and desperate for it, he had turned to whatever actions necessary to obtain it. It was also why James had needed to know if I was one of them or just one of their playthings. None of them would go out on a limb for another. But to regain one of their possessions, they'd be willing to talk.

What the brothers failed to consider was that my father was no fool. He would not have taken me back even if I'd begged his forgiveness; there certainly wouldn't be any negotiation with them over something as inconsequential as a pathetic, treacherous girl. In fact, it was almost laughable that they thought they stood a chance. Father would not tolerate threats, much less idle ones; James and Julius were in for a shock when they realized the gold dollar they'd staked their venture on was nothing more than a tarnished penny.

“You are signing your own death sentence.” I warned them, for probably the ninth time since we’d set out. The path was unfamiliar to me, but then I wasn’t a girl scout and so any route involving so many trees would look unnavigable.

Julius merely laughed at me, as he had the previous eight times. “If I didn’t know any better, I would think that you want to spend the rest of your life with James and I. Have you grown attached already?”

“Hardly.” My voice was cold and rough. “I would not choose your company if my life depended on it.”

James turned to look at me, undaunted by my insult and wearing a smile to prove it. But it was Julius who responded. “It does. Besides, do you think we want to watch you die?”

“Probably,” The word was acidic. “But you’re not going to get the chance. Father won’t tolerate this.”

“Yeah, yeah, your daddy will rip my head off and feed it to James before staking him along the gate.” Julius rolled his eyes, bored. “Can you see me quaking?”

Ignoring him, I turned instead to James, who’d been more or less silent since he’d woken me up that morning. “If you threaten the vampires, they will respond in the only way they know how: they’ll kill you.”

“*If* they do,” James glanced at me, and I noticed how he put extra emphasis on the word ‘if’. He was very flippant...so much so that I wondered whether he were trying to start something. “Then our people will retaliate.”

“You don’t get it.” I objected. “That will mean war. Tons of lives will be lost: your people and mine. A war of our worlds puts the humans at risk.”

“As if you care about the humans,” Julius’ laugh was full of scorn. “Not that it matters. Our race would extinguish yours first.”

His arrogance made me less inclined to believe that, though it was probably the truth. Personal bias aside, James needed to see the truth I was trying to show him. It wasn’t in his interest that I tried to make him understand, but in the interest of the people in town. People like Larissa.

“I didn’t say they wouldn’t. But when my father kills you, he will be expecting an attack. He’ll probably wage the war himself. No matter how great a fighter you are, you will be putting everyone in jeopardy.” Giving him a moment to let that sink in, I paused, “But you can prevent that. Just let me go free and turn around. They will never know that you bit me or that I’ve ever even met you. Nobody gets hurt.”

Julius laughed, and even James’ lips twitched. “Nice try, but I’m not turning back.”

“Oh, to hell with your pride!” I yelled so suddenly, so loudly, it made my throat raw. “What’s your father think about this?”

I’d only just met the man, of course, but the king seemed to be one of those ‘for the greater good’ kind of guys. I couldn’t imagine him supporting this suicidal endeavor of theirs, particularly after he’d said that I wasn’t to leave until they decided I was ready. I still didn’t know what I was supposed to be ready for, but I doubted that after just a few days I was.

The relative silence that answered me was all I needed to gather the conclusion that their father didn’t know what they were up to. A dark, hollow laugh managed to escape me as I considered their deception and wondered, really, what made them think they were better than me? If they wanted to betray their father’s wishes and ignore my warnings that was on them. I would not waste any more breath trying to inform them of the threat that they were walking right into.

We carried on in silence the rest of the way, though there wasn’t much further. I hadn’t noticed just how close we were to the house because I had distracted myself with my own impassioned warnings against this hostage negotiation.

The iron gates I knew so well were just beyond the trees we stood among, though I had often stared at the other side of them. From this vantage point, you could see every peak and turret of the place my father called home. From the outside, it looked like an abandoned cathedral, well-maintained but empty all the same. Though there was no life to be found within, those halls were far from empty.

My father appreciated the irony of living in a church. He actually got some sort of power-trip from it, as though this was his personal way of challenging God. A place that had been meant as a safeguard from evil was

now a sanctuary for the darkest souls to inhabit the Earth. The gate was his own personal touch, but everything else was the way it had been when he'd taken up residency there dozens of years ago. The locals just used that as fuel to stoke the fire, proof that everything in the woods was touched by demons. Indeed, it looked haunted, particularly with the sun lighting on the stained glass windows that were covered in a century's worth of grime.

The sky had lightened up some time when we had been under the canopy created by tree branches, painting the horizon with the first tinges of orange. It seemed that everyone had begun to settle in early; the grounds were just as abandoned as the house appeared to be.

“Let’s go.” James grabbed one of my shackled wrists and led me toward the gates, drawing me from my thoughts. The heavy iron yielded under his touch with a loud screech.

The clawing despair in the pit of my stomach increased twofold with each step that I took, my heart beating a frenetic melody against my chest. Surely James could hear it.

I should have been happy to be back, considering my most recent residency, but being faced with these circumstances was a tough pill to swallow. Whether here in the company of my ‘family’ or locked in a room in the den of my enemy, I was still an outcast. “Lovely.” Julius’ voice was acerbic as we approached the large oak doors. I took note of the chipped paint, barely visible under a veil of cobwebs. Father wanted the place to look abandoned and forlorn; He had succeeded by doing nothing at all. “Well,” He leaned towards me, clearly amused with himself. “Are you going to invite us in?”

I didn’t find him half as funny as he found himself.

The brass handle was cold under my palm, a warning of what was to come. The door gave way under my trembling weight, creaking slowly inward.

“That smell...” James muttered.

Julius made a disgusted sound of agreement. “Don’t you people bathe?” He peeked around the corner and then motioned me forward, pressing in close behind.

I was vaguely aware of the men that moved behind me, a wall preventing me from acting upon the desperate instinct to turn and run the

other way. One tentative step later, I was inside and James shut the door behind us. Chills laced my spine as I surveyed the place that had once been my home. Then the tears threatened to fall; *Get a grip.* Knees locked and spine straight, I only hoped my fear wasn't obvious.

Julius moved quickly to my side, wrapping a firm arm around my waist. His unexpected touch made me jump, but the grip wired me in place. It took me a moment to pick up on what he had—the reason he had rushed to my side—but once I did, I feared I would faint. Blood rushed to my head at the same time that my lungs seized; I was remotely grateful for Julius standing stalwartly behind me, for he was at least keeping me upright.

Father stood at the top of the steps, eyeing us dispassionately. He didn't look as furious as I had anticipated, but I wasn't fooled for a second. Julius' grip around my waist tightened as he used me to shield against attack. I couldn't decide whether his presence made me feel threatened or comforted because I couldn't decide who the greater threat was.

"The prodigal daughter returns." Father's mouth lifted into a slow smile—a fruitless gesture. "And she's brought us entertainment." The knowing look in his frigid blue eyes froze my insides, as if they were carved from glaciers.

Behind my father stood the rest of my family, wrapped around the second story balcony, looking down at James, Julius, and myself. The mutual disdain in the room was suffocating.

Suddenly I felt like the main attraction at a three ring circus. There were probably a hundred sets of eyes watching me with distaste, wondering how I could be so stupid as to run, and even worse, to get caught. My feet suddenly seemed really interesting in my lace-up boots, and they managed to occupy me momentarily while my cheeks cooled.

"What have you come here for?" Father's voice cut through the room; I jumped a little. The question was intended for James, though; As far as father was concerned, I had no rights here after what I'd done.

James looked pointedly at me. "I have something that belongs to you."

"This is the twenty first century." Father's voice was bored. "I do not own her." Steeling myself to meet his gaze, I looked up. But his eyes

carefully avoided me, focusing on James as he assessed the threat...or lack thereof.

“I’m here to negotiate a covenant.” James’ words fell around the room like a weight, leaving a deafening silence in their wake. If it hadn’t been obvious before, it was now... I was a bargaining chip. If father didn’t meet the terms James proposed, the werewolves would kill me. I didn’t think anyone other than me was bothered by this.

Some of these people I had grown up with. Some of them I had sort of liked on occasion, and others had been less than cruel to me. One of them had been the world to me once. Xian’s eyes met mine, as if he too had been seeking me out. Seeing him left me colder than I had been before, and after disconnecting eye contact, I tuned myself back into the conversation taking place in time to hear the terms of James’ bargain. “The proposal is simple. Your daughter’s safe return, in exchange for your relocation.”

“Our relocation?” Father laughed, a deep, rolling sound with almost no humor in it.

“Move off this land,” James commanded, “and take her with you.”

Peals of laughter rang in my ears, which burned with anger and embarrassment. I hated this and I hated James and Julius. I hated all of them. Especially Xian, who was coming down the stairs for me, not entertained by the request in the very least.

“If you want to negotiate,” My father spoke slowly and deliberately; his voice was strong enough to hold the rest of the room silent. “Then you must have something with which you can negotiate.”

James paused, taken by surprise. Julius inclined his head in my direction. “What do you think we brought her for?”

I turned around to hide my flaming cheeks and found myself face-to-face with Xian. Julius jerked me closer to him the minute his eyes settled on the approaching threat. He fixed Xian with the coldest look I could have imagined from him. It almost rivaled my father’s. I moved in front of Xian just as the anger on his face was about to ignite, barring the brothers from his impending attack. Upon seeing me, Xian calmed visibly and seemed to forget the werewolf’s presence.

“Lilith.” There was so much in those two syllables that composed my name. Anger, accusation, disappointment, confusion, and relief. They

wound themselves into that one word, despite the fact that Xian had rather close keep of his emotions. “May I speak with you in private?” It was a command cloaked in the words of a question and following his commands had always been one of the few things I was good at.

“Go.” James said, reading my hesitation as a request for permission. Julius’ grip on me loosened, and I shook him off, though I was no happier to be passed over to Xian, particularly with my hands still tethered behind my back.

It was with great reluctance that I allowed Xian to lead me deeper into the shadows of the foyer and into the blackness. We were close enough to hear the negotiation, yet far enough away to keep our meeting private. The hollow formed by the great curve in the staircase offered seclusion; I’d been here a time or two with him, concealed by the shadows. Uncomfortable with thoughts of the past, I glanced toward the door and saw Julius had his eyes trained on me.

“What do you want?” I demanded, keeping a comfortable distance from him. My voice was about as warm and yielding as a blade of steel. I wished the words really could cut right through his heart, but he was unfazed.

“You left.” His voice was low, like he was fighting to keep from yelling. It wasn’t an accusation, nor was it a question. It was fact, hard and unmoving. He’d known I’d intended to run—as close as I’d let him get, he could determine my moves oftentimes before I’d decided upon a course. But he’d never expected I would really do it.

“Yes.”

“I knew you would be back.”

A harsh laugh loosed itself from somewhere deep in my throat. “I wouldn’t have been back, if I had any choice.”

Xian looked like he had his doubts about that statement, but he let go of them and looked at me, almost sadly. “You’re different now,”

“I told you I wouldn’t play your games anymore, but you chose to ignore me. I finally found the courage to do something about it.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Xian waved a dismissive hand. “I meant you are different because of *him*.” His face sobered, eyes narrowing in James’ direction. “He bit you, didn’t he?”

I didn't answer, surprised by the knowledge he had obtained. Xian was clearly revolted. "Where is it?"

"What?"

"The bite. Where is it?" He moved closer, searching for the mark he was now sure would be there. Stiffening to fend off the chill of his curiosity, I shrugged my hair over my shoulder. A few of his powerful strides closed the distance between us and he pushed the rest of my hair away, exposing the old scars—the ones he'd left, shining pink against my pale skin. And then the most recent one...Xian's index finger traced a path along the crest of it, his actions more gentle than I had ever known them to be. But when he held my eyes the ferocity was the same I'd come to know as his. "I'm going to kill him, Lilith." He spoke crisply, as if he had just decided that seemed like a swell idea. Xian released his grip and his gaze, turning toward his victims.

"You can't!" I yelled. When he turned back, the fury in his eyes was acute. The solid blue of his irises, which I had once found endearing, now looked like the center of a hurricane. "If you do that they will attack," I swallowed, recognizing that provocation. He didn't take kindly to being told what to do and what not to do. "It will mean war."

"That's what I intend." Xian snapped. "Clearly they've grown too comfortable, coming here making demands. Kidnapping you was their last move ...It's time we set them straight."

"No, it's not!" I insisted. I didn't know why I was defending them, other than that I didn't want to be at the center of this. My mind kept turning back to the painting James had shown me the previous night...in the werewolves' absence, the vampires ran amok. "No good can come of it. Just drop it, please!"

"Drop it?" He repeated, as if he'd never heard the expression before. I suppose it *was* kind of a foreign concept for him to relent. "After what he did to you?"

"You've done far worse." I was desperate and would have said anything to stop him from waging war. It just so happened the first thing to come to mind was the truth.

Xian's response for that was what I should have anticipated, if past experience were relevant now; the quick slap across the face hurt more than

I had remembered it to. My cheek seared where his hand most likely had left a stinging red print, but I recovered immediately, turning back to him. I'd long ago perfected my stone face. I might have even hit him back, if my hands weren't chained at the wrist.

Something like satisfaction radiated from him briefly, before he moved closer and pressed his lips to the burning spot on my cheek. That kiss wasn't to make it feel better, or even to make me feel better. It was a prelude to the bigger kiss: his lips moving against mine. His actions were so reliable I could have set a clock by them. I pulled away from him, tearing from the hollow familiarity, and caught a little glimpse of the shock on his face before Julius seized our attention.

"Sorry to interrupt, Romeo," His voice dripped with unveiled sarcasm. "Time to go." His hand closed around my arm again, a little tighter than necessary. James watched over his shoulder with cold, hard eyes. He did not look pleased.

"You're not taking her anywhere!" Xian said. It was a sound of danger to me, but James looked unaffected.

"We will return her to you when our terms have been satisfied." He appraised Xian with a relative lack of interest. No doubt, he was wondering who Xian thought he was, making those kinds of demands.

"I'm not letting her leave again!" Xian growled, jerking me in his direction, pulling against Julius' hold on me. A gasp of pain tore past my lips, and Julius released me only to make better use of his hands...he lunged at Xian and wrapped them around that pale neck, squeezing tight. He could have collapsed Xian's throat in those two seconds, but the fact that he hadn't told me he was holding back.

"Julius!" James growled. But Julius had no mind for anything other than Xian at the moment, and he squeezed him so tight I expected he would behead him right there. Instead, he threw Xian across the room with ease, sending him skittering into a pile at my father's feet. Perhaps I'd have laughed if the action hadn't been so shocking and simultaneously frightening. Fury was written on his face. Xian stood, jaw clenched, and tried to advance but one of father's hands upon his shoulder stopped him from coming after us.

Julius found his hold on me again, dragging me toward the door.

This couldn't be real. My father may have been angry with me, and he may have wanted me dead. But why would he let them take me? I had expected at the very worst that he would kill me in front of them to set an example. Was he letting me go with them because it made a better example, advertised ramifications worse than death?

Father turned away, leaving me to stare questioningly at the receding form of his stiff black blazer. Xian's murderous gaze latched upon my shoulders; I couldn't suppress the shudder that wracked me as James and Julius pulled me into the crisp morning light.

"You don't know what you've done!" Xian's voice trailed after us. "You've just turned a fruitless battle into a war!"

Despite the yelling James remained calm, as though he hadn't heard a thing. "I will come for her," Xian yelled. "And I will kill you all!"

"We'll see about that." Julius said, and as a ray of sunlight flashed upon his face I saw the smile.

"I'll come for you!" Xian called after us as we disappeared through the gates, about to be swallowed by the forest. Whether it was a threat or a promise, I wasn't sure, but I didn't like either.

"What's going on?" I demanded. James was silent as we pushed onward. I half-expected to see Father issue from the dark shape of the house and put a stop to this. But nobody moved behind us and Julius dragged me forward still. When we had cleared the property without any indication that we had a tail, I tore my arm from his grip and rounded on him, livid. James walked by, undaunted, and carried on a few paces before turning back to face me. I took in the fist clenched at his side and his squared jaw, but I couldn't bring myself to care that he was mad. "He denied the proposal." His voice was irritated. "He wasn't interested in negotiation at all."

"What do you mean 'he wasn't interested'?"

"He denied our terms." Julius explained. "Every offer we suggested, he turned down."

"Every offer?" I repeated, though he clearly was telling the truth, based upon the fact that I was here with him instead of locked in that dark old attic room at Xian's mercy. "What did you ask of him?"

“Only to move off this land.” James explained. “I know of accommodations thirty miles outside of this city’s limits that would be better suited to his wicked lifestyle.”

“And in exchange? What did you offer him?” I knew the answer of course, but I wanted to hear it aloud. What did he have now to offer that he didn’t have two years or even seven days ago?

“You.” He was unashamed of divulging that, even though the admission sent a blow through me that hurt worse than Xian’s hand crossing my face. “And continued peace. An extra night of hunting each month...” He shook his head, bitter. “The man is stubborn. He wanted nothing that I offered him and even when I proposed that he create his own terms since I’d oblige most anything, still he refused me.”

“That’s not true.” Even I could hear the denial in my voice, petulant and wavering. I knew it full well, but rejecting that truth as falsity gave me a sense of hope, no matter how small, that my father cared. He was my *father* after all, how could he turn me away so resolutely? “There must have been something he desired.”

James shook his head. “Nothing I could offer was to his satisfaction.”

“You’re lying!” I was dangerously close to crying; my throat felt thick with unshed tears. *Don’t let them see you cry.* “You were never going to let me return home. You only needed me to get you in the door alive.”

“I haven’t lied to you.” James said with a shake of his head. He looked at me pitifully and began walking again.

“You have! And I have a right to know, what are you keeping me for?”

“Because he didn’t want you!” James whipped back around just in time to see my denial falter as the pain of reality hit me. His face was still a mask of anger, but when he saw my reaction, it began to mellow. “If it were up to your boyfriend, I’m sure you would have stayed, but since he’s not in charge you’re stuck with us.”

“Don’t talk about things you know nothing about.” My voice was dangerously low, possessing a venom I didn’t know I had in me. The mention of Xian as my boyfriend was jarring, and I wasn’t about to take

that from somebody who hadn't the slightest idea what sort of monster he was.

"Oh," Julius chimed in. "Is Prince Charming a touchy subject?" The threatening look I shot his way did nothing to quell his sarcasm. In fact, it seemed a direct line to his anger. "His kiss didn't save you from all of this, Lilith. You're stuck here and things aren't going to change. This is your reality now. Accept it."

I tried to cling to the tatters of my patience and my dignity but the tears sprang to my eyes anyways. Biting my lip staved off the onslaught enough for me to mutter, "You don't know anything."

"Maybe I don't know your love story or how much being away from him kills you, but I do know this: your father told us to take you. He didn't want you."

In an instant any sense of sorrow in my body was replaced with rage. I loathed him and his brother and the situation they had put me in, and I was going to show him just how much. He was just as surprised as I was when my head collided with his jaw. The act caused me more pain than him, but it succeeded in catching him off guard. The instant became an opportunity to escape.

I was fast, but surely not any match for a werewolf, which is why I was hoping the element of surprise would give me an advantage. My own breathing grew so loud it was like a beacon, alerting them to my location, and I focused on remaining quiet through my carefully placed footfalls. The ground would catch me if I tripped, and they'd be upon me in the next instant.

This time was no half-hearted attempt. On top of my father rejecting them, my violent escape had probably contributed to Julius' anger; I didn't ever want to witness the full extent of it. If I could only outrun them a little while further, a call for help ought to send someone in my direction. *Just get into human territory...they can't attack you in front of a human without risking exposure.*

Once again, I was off without a plan. Last time that hadn't seemed like such a problem what with the adrenaline of escape coursing through my veins, but last time hadn't worked out so well. Of course, this time things would be different. I needed to go farther than I had been before.

A sudden sound issuing from nearby underbrush caught my attention, causing me to turn in spite of my good sense. I did not trip on a fallen branch and twist my ankle or tumble into a concealed pit, but I did the next most awful thing and ran directly into someone. A pair of strong arms wrapped tightly around me and though I didn't look up to see who was holding me, I fought to get loose. The grip that fastened me in place tightened and the movement caused me to catch a drift of a familiar, earthy scent. I looked up into the face I'd hoped to never see again. "Where do you think you're going?" Julius crooned, mocking me.

I struggled against him, desperate to get away. But Julius was not to be tested; he wrenched me close, his hands like vices on my arms, and for a moment I thought him capable of murder. That was the moment it took for a gigantic wolf to pounce, knocking me to the ground. I rolled, covering my face, and willed the ground to swallow me whole. Anything to escape this fury.

But instead of seeping into the ground, I was practically lifted into the air. Julius grabbed me by the collar of my shirt and dragged me up to my full, unimpressive height. His image was blurry from where a few tears had dotted my vision at the pain erupting in my shoulder. "Do you really think you stand any chance against us?"

I looked away. It had seemed like no answer was the best answer, but he did not seem to appreciate my silence. He gave me a little shake, rattling my chain, which felt so heavy they might tear my arms from their sockets.

As if summoned by my hatred, my instincts began to make themselves remembered. I wasn't merely a helpless girl, a naïve captive. I was descended from a twisted, yet powerful lineage, and though I was no hunter, I possessed the skills of one. Another swift head-butt in the nose forced Julius to release me. Within seconds I was behind him, my mouth just over his throbbing carotid artery, fixing James with a dangerous look of warning.

In moments of intensity, clear thought often evades people, quite simply because logic pales in comparison to emotion. That's why I didn't realize that I would get myself nowhere with this threat. I was not a full vampire, and as such I did not possess all the same abilities as a full-fledged vampire; Biting Julius would not turn him. Of course, James may not have

known that. No matter how knowledgeable he may be, I was a novelty in the modern world. He could not have known everything about me.

Julius, realizing the peril of his position, attempted to move, trying to loose himself from my grip, but I clutched him tighter, pushing every bit of effort in my body into holding him still. So close to his artery, with all that blood just an inch of skin away, a primordial longing coursed through me. Julius felt my warm breath on his flesh and jerked away. I had put no pressure to his skin before, but now I touched my teeth gently into his skin enough to leave two white indents—but nowhere near close to piercing the flesh.

I looked up to gauge James' reaction, but he was leaping through the air. There was barely any delay between noticing his action and falling to the ground, knocked down by his weight, my head nesting atop a knotted tree trunk emerging from the ground. The taste of copper seemed to flood my mouth, and through my darkening vision, I saw that he stood above me, the face of a wolf pulled into a growl, two paws pinning me against the hard ground. He stared at me as if trying to say something, which obviously couldn't be done in his current form. Taken over by stubborn indignation, I refused to look away from him—until a second wolf relieved him. Julius' weight made breathing more difficult, and his paws threatened to cave my chest in. But it didn't matter. What did I have that was worth living for anyways?

All energy sapped, I couldn't fight off the fuzzy feeling of warmth that closed in on me, falling in like a house of collapsing cards. My vision drifted between his snarling face and then blessed emptiness.

CHAPTER NINE

In my experience, the feeling of teeth cutting through skin had nothing on the headache that greeted me when my eyes finally rolled open. Surely a knife had been lodged between my eyes, causing my nerves to fire on repeat. And yet, for all the pain it caused me, I couldn't bring myself to care.

Though I despised myself for it, I couldn't shake the despair that lurked in my stomach at James' revelation that my father had not wanted me. We had an unconventional relationship, certainly, but he was my father all the same. He'd protected me the best he could, he'd embraced my presence though it was only a weakness to him. Despite my unwillingness to believe my father had simply told them to take me with them and get lost, I knew it was true. And I knew why.

Pride was a damnable aspect in father's home, one that ironically allowed him to keep everyone in check. At the slightest injuring of his ego, father would have the offender disposed of in whatever way he felt necessary. Should anyone dare defy him, they were the next example. What I did by running away was a slap in his face, a move that reflected negatively upon him. But the fact that I'd been caught by the enemy—well, I'd set the precedent for him on this one. After seeing me dragged into the werewolves' possession, who else would be stupid enough to defy him?

Hate swirled around and within me, threatening to choke me from the inside out, leeching every bit of compassion from my bones. But the problem was that I didn't know who to hate. Xian, for the suffering I'd endured at his hand, that which had ultimately driven me to this point? Or my father, who'd made an example of his only daughter and rejected his own flesh and blood in favor of the family he'd adopted. Or James, for biting me and dragging me here, for refusing to let me go, and trying to use my life as nothing more than a poker chip...for putting a time limit on my life.

Though they were all potentially great suspects, I knew that the person I hated the most was myself. That wasn't exactly new, since I'd hated myself for the majority of my life. What *was* new, though, was the way that the hatred boiled over, so that I felt like I was only capable of anger. That was why I attacked Julius the next time he walked through the door.

He'd barely opened the door before I flung myself at him, nails digging into the skin at the base of his throat, causing him to choke on his surprise. I didn't really know what I planned to do with him, but I didn't have any time to think about it as he grabbed me around the waist and threw me on the bed. I sprang up on the defensive, but he was only staring at me, his anger a mirror of my own. Much to my satisfaction, red lines marked his tanned skin where I'd found purchase.

"If it were up to me, I'd dump you on the street and be done with it." His voice was a growl; he meant the words. "Unfortunately for you, nobody has ever given a damn about what I want. Get up."

Unwilling to allow him any sort of satisfaction, I stayed still. "I'm not going anywhere with you. Do you think I'm stupid?"

"I do, actually. Because if you weren't, you wouldn't question the fact that you're about to receive the answers you've been demanding since you got here. Let's go."

As much as I wanted those answers, I didn't want them to come from Julius. I didn't want anything from him. I suspected even the truth would be considered too valuable to be wasted upon me. "I'd rather not."

"Well, you know how I said nobody cares what I want? They care even less about what you want. Now do you want to come with me, or should I pick you up and drag you?"

My jaw clenched around my irritation, but I stood up and looked at him unhappily. I would not put it past him to do just that, and it wasn't exactly an inspiring thought. "Where are we going?" I noticed the dark

green button up he wore, offset by jeans so as to make him appear only a notch above casual.

Julius offered me no answer, so I grudgingly followed him out of my room and into the labyrinth of the cellars. He didn't speak to me as we carved a path through the cramped halls, and it was overtly silent as we crossed from room to room. I wondered where everyone was...it seemed that nobody lived here, but at dinner there hadn't been an empty chair.

Sunlight filtered in through the floor-length window at the end of the hall, illuminating the doors that were tucked away into the walls. I hadn't noticed before just how many of them there were. This place could go on forever...what went on behind those doors?

Finally Julius stopped before one and let himself in. After a moment of hesitation, I followed him, deciding that if he were taking me to a miserable death, at least it meant that we were about to part ways. But where I'd expected to enter a room filled with knives and guns and medieval torture devices, this was the polar opposite.

It was a courtyard. Other than the fact that we were still inside, it was identical to one I would expect outside. The ceiling was arched high above my head in the center of the room, much like the library James had shown to me the other day, with the same tall arches circling it. The sunlight fell upon everything below it, soft as it prepared to retire. But where the arches in the library had led to windows, whatever areas the sun couldn't reach expanded into darkness, seemingly infinitely. It smelled distinctly warm...like cinnamon or cocoa.

Vines ran along the walls, snaking out of the flower beds. And directly beneath the center was a concrete fountain, upon which the king sat, eyes fixed on me. "Lilith," The smile that he offered me suggested we were old friends, but I had nothing to say, nor did I have a smile to offer him. The confusion only made my head ache that much worse. All the different smells didn't help.

Julius turned and took his leave, and then it was just me in the cavernous room with the King. Perhaps I should have curtsied or something, but this wasn't my king—he was my captor. And despite the fact that I liked him—or at least didn't hate him—I was feeling less than gracious. "I know you must be wondering why I had you brought here."

The look on my face should have said it all; I joined him near the fountain, but before I could sit, he stuck his hands out as if he needed assistance. Only a moment's hesitation passed before I grabbed his hands in my own and helped him to stand. I'd grown used to living among the cold-blooded; his touch was warmer than I'd expected—almost feverish. Whatever illness he suffered from must have produced that effect.

He seemed to know the direction my thoughts were headed. "My sons think I am much sicker than I am. Too sick to notice that the three of you disappeared for hours yesterday." He cut me an unaffected look. "What do you think?"

I appraised him—the face that was still similar to his sons', strong and sculpted bone structure, good symmetry—and yet betraying signs of age and exhaustion. His eyes conveyed warmth and tolerance, but also wisdom. He exuded a kind of calm that felt like a trick, the same as his daughter. My rage seemed a silly thing to cling to in front of him. "I think you're smarter than they give you credit for." My words were spoken with caution, all the while I gauged his expression.

A laugh escaped him. "You'd be correct. I know that James thought trying to negotiate with your father was the best thing, and I know Julius put his mind to it."

The man held my gaze a moment, before turning towards one of the gilded archways and heading into the darkness. I knew I was meant to follow, and so I did. As we passed out of the sun's path it grew colder, but the king seemed not to mind. "My sons foolishly thought that the path laid out before them—the easy one—was the correct one. They do not know half the things that I do, and even I don't understand much."

I waited for more. It didn't come easily, as we walked still in silence for several minutes before reaching a door carved out of a dark, foreign wood—smooth and untouched, and so dark I nearly missed it folded into the corners of blackness. For the first time since I'd helped him to his feet the king faced me. His features were clear even in the din of the corridor; sincerity marked the shadows in his eyes and repeated itself in his voice when he spoke.

"This door locks on one side...this side. It is not a door that is meant to keep people in, but one fashioned to keep others out." A shiver passed over my shoulders, as if his words were the removal of a cloak. *I* was the thing that they meant to keep out. "On the other side, there exists nothing but tunnel for miles. It is cold and dank and smells of mold. But if you follow it far enough, there is light. There will always be a light." He smiled. "If you should wish to leave, that is a choice I would respect. But before you do so, I have to implore you to stay, and I have to tell you the truth that my son is too ashamed to say out loud."

Suspicion hardened my eyes, and I stared at him as if I could glean his motive just by looking hard enough. My pulse picked up in excitement, simultaneously delighted and terrified at the thought of answers, of freedom, of everything I'd been seeking. When at last I found my voice hiding somewhere deep in my throat, it was only a single word that I croaked forth. "Why?"

"More reasons than even I know." The sigh that dragged his chest up and then down again seemed to exhaust him. "But there is one, most selfish reason I would implore you to stay, and I should hope it is not the very one that will drive you away." Anticipation held the air in my lungs hostage as I waited for him to continue. When he did, it was not to say what I had expected. "Have you ever known true love, Lilith?"

"True love?" I shook my head, not sure how that had any relevancy. I'd thought I had known it, but that had been an illusion, well-crafted and meticulously executed.

“You don’t know, then, of the twining of souls? How each one is split into two entities, and then becomes two separate souls. And, though separate, they are two halves of a whole, needing each other to subsist.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand where this is going...”

“I should expect not.” He shook his head, visibly switching gears. “Our law dictates that one soul-two entities-must rule the throne together. Man and woman is the typical case, but I imagine other combinations should be entertained one day soon. The reason being that through the two halves, we may achieve a balance as close to perfection as our Earthly selves will ever get. In our culture, we have customs. And as customs generally do, to an outsider such as yourself they may appear very strange.” The King cocked his head the slightest bit, as if he had heard my heart begin hammering. My brain had flooded with thoughts of being sacrificed—losing fingers or toes before having my heart carved from my chest. Those were just a few of the rituals I’d heard the werewolves performed by the firelight. “I could explain to you the reason behind this custom, but I suspect it won’t hold much water once I reveal it, so that’s something I will save for another day. For now, I will tell you this—the greatest of oaths offer a physical seal. They are preserved with a kiss or sworn in blood. When we fall in love, it is a commitment we make, not only to another person, but to the Creator. That covenant is sealed with a kiss—a celestial kiss.”

“A celestial kiss?” I still had no idea what was happening or where this was leading, but the words rolled off my tongue. In spite of myself, I was intrigued.

“A bite.” He nodded. “Much like the one on your shoulder.” Though the proof of his son’s indiscretion was covered by my hair, his eyes knew the precise spot it was, as if they magically gravitated towards something I couldn’t conceal. “It forms an unbreakable bond between the souls, anchoring them together through all eternity.”

My eyelids fluttered open and closed a few times in quick succession, as though that would clear the cobwebs in my brain. I’d very

clearly heard his words, but they made no sense, as though he'd spoken them in another language.

"You are bound to James in a way that I fear you may never understand. And that is not said out of disrespect. Rather, I think no one will ever understand the true capacity of that action. Had he killed you in that instant, you'd have never been connected by more than unfortunate circumstance. But James is not a killer, and you are not what he thought you were. The moment he decided to bite you, he sealed your fate in one of two options."

Cold, solid wall held me in place as I sagged, trying to piece together what this all meant, and simultaneously hoping it was not what I suspected. "Our souls are anchored to one another?" I finally managed to squeak, afraid of the answer I would receive. It came as a brief nod. A laugh bubbled out of me, which I quickly shook off. "That can't be. It doesn't make any sense. By your logic, anyone could bite another person—and then what? They become slaves unto each other?" The prospect was ridiculous. "I don't believe you."

It was too invasive. How was it possible for a man to bite a woman he'd never before met, and in doing so effectively glue their souls to each other? What about choice and free will? What about a consensual agreement?

"The bite alone does not create the covenant, dear child." The King smiled. "If the Creator believes in the choice, His approval seals it."

"His approval?"

"Your shoulder." The king nodded his head at me. "That scar would be gone if he disapproved, as if it had never happened. Your paths would diverge, and you'd likely never cross each other again. It's a symbol of your attachment. Just as that scar can never be removed, that bond cannot be broken."

“So that’s it? I’m stuck with him now for all eternity because he attacked me outside of a greasy truck stop?” Hysteria crept into my voice, echoing in the dark halls. I almost laughed, because it was just absurd.

A pair of men who stood together a few feet away looked up from their conversation, as if ready to react should I decide to bite the king’s head off. I hadn’t even noticed their presence; I suspected they resented that.

“As I said, it is not just because he bit you. In one way or another, your destinies were twined, otherwise the Creator never would have approved of it.”

“Oh,” I said, because it was all that I could think of. I felt breathless; his words were an anvil, the weight of which threatened to crush me. “I’m bound to your son for the rest of my life. Is that all?”

“I’m afraid not.” The King’s voice was gentle, but firm. “The thing that James hasn’t come to terms with is that a vampire and a werewolf are natural enemies. They can’t coexist in the same body.” I stared blankly at him. I’d lost all ability to show any emotion, sarcasm or no. “On the next full moon, when your body begins the transformation, the vampire in you will attack the werewolf that manifests. You will quite literally tear yourself apart.” His eyes were somber.

“I’m dying...” I concluded, remembering the touch-and-go pain, the way it seemed to make me into somebody else.

“There are stories...” His eyes danced over me, his words hesitant. “Myths, as far as I know...of a woman who did manage to exist as both, but in my experience, it hasn’t happened.”

I wondered what he meant about his own experience, and why he had even bothered telling me about the myth in the first place. “But that does me no good,” I said. “James had told me how long I had to live, but I didn’t realize what it meant.”

“As I said, you are a guest. You are free to leave whenever you wish...I’ve made it abundantly clear to my son’s that they are not to fight you. But I needed to make sure that you knew exactly what you were dealing with. You are bound to my son until the day you die, not more than a few weeks from now. And even after.”

CHAPTER TEN

“Maybe I should have told you before,” Janna sighed. “But I had hoped James would tell you himself and I didn’t want to pile everything on you all at once.”

It was cold, despite the weak morning sun. I tugged on the sleeves of my shirt, covering my hands with them because I didn’t want to look at her or have her look at me. But she was, with some form of pity that made me self-conscious. She’d practically begged me to take a walk with her, and so far we’d only managed to circle half of the property while she pointed out little things along the way.

I’d spent the entire night trying to make sense of all that the King had laid bare for me, but I was no closer to understanding any of my circumstances than I had been before going to see him. I’d decided on a few certainties: 1—I was dying. 2—I could leave, but it would not give me any satisfaction. 3—I was dying.

“I’m not delicate.” My surly grumble was proof of that. But while I wanted to be mad at her, it wasn’t her fault. James had gotten me — and himself—into this mess. He should have told me what the consequences of his actions meant, not tried to ignore it or pawn the task off on his ailing father.

“Of course not.” A grin cracked her face, as if she knew she’d been let off the hook. I wasn’t letting go that easily, though.

“What, exactly, does it mean for me?”

“I’ve only heard about it before, so I can’t tell you first hand.” She offered a disclaimer. “As far as I know, things are pretty normal as long as the vow is unbroken. I know, *normal* is relative around here. It is only under circumstances of betrayal that things could become bad...the offender is executed as penance for their sins.” She’d looked away at the last few words, but gathered the courage to flick her eyes back to mine. I surprised her with a simple shrug of my shoulders.

“What else?”

“Let me explain it the way we teach the children.”

“I’ll try not to be insulted.”

Janna grinned. “Okay, so you have a soul. It is this beautiful thing, bright and shiny and inherently good. The Creator made them, and then he gifted them to humans...his prized children. But some of the angels were jealous of the humans, of how the Creator wrote these stories for their lives and then just watched them always, witnessing the steps they took and the paths they chose to get to the end of their story. So, eventually, there was an uprising...the angels took the soul and ripped it in two. Each human thereafter had only half of a soul...they lived their entire lives as though something were missing, because it was. So they began to seek their other halves, and they learned that the Creator, of course, could mend the soul if they wished. They did this by the bite...a mark that would show the world that their soul was intact.”

“You’re saying...” I laughed. “You mean to tell me that James is my soul mate?” I thought of how he seemed to avoid me, how he dodged my questions and had tried so desperately to trade me away. Was he ashamed that he’d chosen me as the other half of him? I didn’t doubt it.

“That’s just how we learn it.” She shrugged. “I do believe, of course, that there is a plan for you...and I suppose that you were meant to cross my brother in some way, so...yeah, I guess it’s possible.”

I didn’t want her to see me entertain the idea, ludicrous as it was, but there was a small part that wondered whether it wasn’t entirely fiction. I mean, it was a myth just like Prometheus and Atlas and Sirius...but it sounded almost like it could be truth. Of course, accepting that soul mates did exist was a far cry from accepting that James was mine. Even if I could wrangle the idea that I needed someone else to complete me, it couldn’t have been the man who was bringing my life to an end. Furthermore, if it were more than just a way of explaining things too delicate for a child’s mind to comprehend, then that meant my soul mate, whoever he was, was out of luck.

If I wanted to believe in it, and I wanted to look for a soul mate that wasn’t a werewolf, I could leave—steal and lie and cheat through the next two weeks of my life, sacrifice my morals and dignity in the name of freedom. I could try to make something of the time I had left, try to find someone to fulfill me, but at what cost? There was nothing I wanted to do so badly as walk and breathe freely, both of which could be done here.

Better to have never loved at all...better to never feel the waves crash against me or freedom race through my veins and then have it wrenched from me before getting to enjoy it all. And I hated to consider it, but what if the King was right...what if James truly was my soulmate, or I was his?

I would stay—at least for now.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

After my absence the night before, it seemed infinitely more shocking to my audience when I appeared for dinner at Janna's side, donned in one of her demure dresses. I surely looked as uncomfortable as I felt, both because I was not the type of girl to wear dresses and because I did not exactly thrive on the attention. In fact, having all those eyes on me made me consider running to that secret chamber and taking the escape I'd been offered. But Janna's smile anchored me; I followed her, head held high, and slipped into the seat that had been left vacant between James and the King, who both turned eyes on me. The King's smile was small and genuinely happy, while James' was forced and tight.

The king and his sons immersed themselves in a conversation that seemed to be of great importance to them, as it spanned throughout a large portion of the evening. I eavesdropped at first, then quickly grew bored when they did not so much as glance my way – instinctively, I knew that whatever it was that mattered so much to them was worthless to me. My mind began to wander. No longer a captive of their droll conversation, I took up a survey of the room.

It was weird to see this array of people together in one room: short and thin or all-around large, men and women of all ages, with varying skin tones. And each of them radiated a beauty entirely their own, the sort which showed them to be self-possessed and assured. It was not the look of confidence that I'd witnessed among the vampires which branded them all the same, yet a sense of camaraderie, as though it was through this variety that they achieved their strength. I envied them; their flawed beauty was perfect. A lump formed in my throat...they were everything I'd ever wanted.

“They’ve all spent hours gossiping about you.” Janna whispered. I turned to look at her around her brother’s head. “You’re quite the scandal around here.”

“I had no choice in that,” I reminded her grudgingly.

“I know.” Janna’s green eyes sparkled, “But I figured you might appreciate the chance to do the same.”

She had an intoxicating personality...though her brothers gave me nothing but trouble, she offered genuine compassion...friendship. Despite my suspicion the fact that gossip was not my cup of tea, I was intrigued.

Janna was more than happy to give me the scoop on the guests whenever she wasn’t drawn into conversation by another party. I didn’t trust myself to remember the names of so many people, but by the time dinner began to wind to a close I knew who was courting whom, every scandal these people had ever been involved in (there weren’t many) and I could identify the council members who helped the King in making decisions like whether or not to kill me.

Occasionally, someone would look up and lock eyes with us, to which both Janna and I would smile and continue talking in hushed tones. But there was one man, whose invasive stare I could not brush off with a smile. There was something dark in his eyes...an unspoken, unfounded hatred.

Janna seemed to notice the shift in energy, just as I noticed the shift in her voice. It was subtle, but I caught it all the same.

“Olias.” She whispered the name as though it both intrigued her and left an unsavory taste upon her tongue.

I willed her to continue, but she seemed lost within her thoughts so I resigned myself instead to trying to commit to memory all that I’d learned. I scanned their faces as she told me things that were entirely irrelevant, bewitched by their lives, until dinner wound to a close. The twine of conversation thinned as the crowd departed in droves and I realized that it was actually kind of exhausting, pretending to be mild mannered and self-contained.

“Lilith,” My name rang through the room, just loud enough to gather the attention of all that remained in the hall. I looked up from my thoughts to see the man that Janna had informed me was Olias. He watched me with curiosity etched into the faint crinkles around his eyes. He did not look old, exactly, just like his lifetime had been unkind. “That’s your name, right?”

I tensed, feeling the eyes on me, a hunger for knowledge that I had seen in Julius a few days prior. James was close enough to me that I felt him stiffen just a little. “Yes.”

“Interesting name, that. There’s quite a bit of biblical lore tied up in it. Did you ever ask your parents what they were thinking, giving you a name with such baggage?” The malicious gleam in his eyes told me that, although he wanted the answer to that question, his timing was intentional. He’d voiced the very thing that had undoubtedly been toying at everyone else’s minds. The little bit of chatter that had remained was suddenly gone, and everyone was looking at me now. A sideways glance at Janna yielded an imperceptible shake of her head, and though I couldn’t be sure, I took that as a sign to feign ignorance.

“I never thought much about it.” I refused to take my eyes from his. I could recognize a challenge as it was presented to me.

“Well, it’s certainly unique. And yet, you seem to be a mirror to the legendary beauty of the original Lilith...the temptress of Adam.”

“I wouldn’t know,” I said, “As I’ve never met her.”

Olias laughed. His face was decidedly attractive, in spite of his too-confident swagger. “Nor have I.” He tapped his temple. “But I can imagine.”

I looked desperately at Janna for salvation, and she stood, beckoning me to follow. “It was *lovely* to meet you,” I lied. The eyes that were trained to my back followed me out the room, with no relief until we’d cleared the splendid archway and disappeared into the hall.

“What an ass,” I muttered. It felt good to drop the princess act.

“Yes,” Janna agreed. “It is rather marvelous.”

I blinked, trying to ascertain whether she’d been serious. She glanced at me from the corner of her eyes. “He doesn’t like you,” She said, as if that hadn’t been glaringly obvious. His words themselves hadn’t been malicious, but the way he looked at me, and the way he’d spoken... It was as if I had offended him simply by existing, which—given my existence—was an acute possibility.

“Oh, really?” I mumbled. “I hadn’t noticed.”

To my surprise, Janna actually laughed a little. “It’s a story for another day.”

Suspicion narrowed my eyes. “Why not today?”

“I’m busy.” Her answer came so quick, I knew she was brushing me off. “Sorry.”

I shrugged like it did not offend me and kept walking. “Maybe I will come by later?” Janna called after me. But I was already down the hall.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Alone again, I sat on the window seat and pulled back the curtains. A cold chill pushed against the glass where I rested my cheek. I sighed, comforted by the solidity that glass pane offered, and for the first time in a long time, that sigh was not entirely of discontent. The moon was just a pale sliver in an otherwise unmarred sky, and it made me think of the times I'd looked out the window of my father's house, at the drying gardens with flowers that had been choked out by weeds. Vines had broken away from the ground and began snaking up the walls, taking refuge in the cracks caused from the chips of old stone. It was an image I'd seen so many times, I could etch it even with my eyes closed.

Below me now, there was a vastly different scene. It was ironic, really, that my father's home had been meant as a salvation for those who would no longer be bound to human constraints, and yet it became a prison of its own making. Here, where I had been brought as a prisoner, beauty and life seemed to bloom in even the darkest corners. It was evident in the gardens below, with roses of such vivid colors I wasn't entirely convinced from up there that they were indeed real.

I hated James for what he was putting me through... or at least I thought I did...but there was no way of denying that I *liked* it there. Even my brief stint in the city had been so rapid, so disappointing, that it paled in comparison to this. Foolishly I had believed that the city would turn me in the right direction...that it would solve all of my problems and lead me right to Samuel. Of course, where I went from there hadn't really been a well-laid plan, but I'd be lying if I said I was the kind of person who made plans. I was angry, and I held fast to that anger because it was still a relief to feel emotion, anything, so long as I didn't have to be numb anymore. My refusal to let it go, however, meant that where James was concerned, the anger was close to follow. And even though I couldn't be in the same room with him for more than a few minutes without contemplating murder-suicide, I didn't actually want him to die. I especially didn't want to be responsible for his death. I didn't want to leave, for him or for me, who could say? And at the same time, I had unfinished business. I'd promised

Gabrielle I would find her son...never mind that she'd been dead when I made that promise, and so I spoke the words to nothing more than her corpse.

I blinked, chasing away the traitorous thoughts, and decided that an unoccupied mind was a dangerous thing. The room was large, but sparse with little to explore other than a bookshelf nestled in the wall. Heavy philosophical pieces were at home on the top shelf, but I'd had enough practical philosophy in the past few days to last me a lifetime. Below that were the classics—books I'd already read several times through. The bottom two rows were jammed with books of varying sizes and subjects, even a few textbooks. The lack of intrigue the bookcase offered led me to the assumption that the books were most likely all of the common garden variety, until as I was turning away something caught my eye. Sandwiched into one of the lower shelves, a nondescript book was turned backwards, with the spine in, as if it had been set there in haste.

It was this book in a most ordinary navy binding that I took with me to the window seat, only to find that the first several pages were blank. Mystified, I ran the pages through my fingers, stopping at the first sign of words and the realization that this book was handwritten. In fact, it did not seem to be a book at all. It was a journal.

Certainly another person's trivial life dramas would pale in comparison to my own. I was hoping for catty gossip, scathing inner thoughts, anything. The prospect for escapism excited me; it offered a tempting refuge from all the nonsense that comprised my life, no matter how brief.

The first written page seemed as though it should have come later, for there was no prelude. Rather it jumped right into a mess of twisting purple letters that looked like they'd been written in haste.

It seems as though pressure is all that exists any more, as though I am on a plane of my own and there is only duty. Gone are the days of freedom, the evenings I could spend with a book in some far off world, and even the days where there was nothing binding other than the schedule to which we adhere. In a sea of uncertainty, the only guarantee is that the problems never stop. Not that I expected them to, but it does feel as though I'm drowning in them, as though the problems of other people are weighing me down.

I'm afraid I sound petulant, but to whom should I justify myself? This is not a duty that I'd ever dreamed of having, nor something I asked for, but rather something that I inherited, like a mess of dark curls and a wild spirit. And really, I suppose nobody asks for the tasks that are handed to them in this life. Certainly, Jesus didn't ask to be persecuted and yet, it was a responsibility he accepted humbly.

Did I really just compare myself to Jesus?

Shit, I've finally gone mad.

If I'm being honest, what scares me is failure. It seems as though everyone around me is perfect, and I, the one with a lofty cross to bear, am flawed beyond repair. I cannot expect others to instill in me their faith when I don't have any in myself, and so I will feign that confidence, if that is what my people need from me. But here, in the darkest corners of my mind, in the deepest admissions of my soul, I will speak nothing but the truth. And that truth is that I am a slave of my own creation, tethered to this life by mere circumstance.

The entry was all that existed on the page, without so much as an initial to seal it or a date to mark the emotions of the author, both of which served as catalyst to my curiosity. It was almost as if I'd written this myself. How many times had I feared failure, feared the knowledge that I would never be able to live up to the expectations of my father, of my siblings, of myself? This person, who'd spilled upon a delicate page even more delicate secrets, had felt as much a prisoner as I. The knowledge shook me to the core, and in spite of myself, I felt a glimmer of something like hope...

It was a long shot, but perhaps there were others out there like me. Clearly, I wasn't the only one who'd felt this pressure to exist beyond the limits I'd supposed. What if the reason that I identified so eerily well with the mysterious author was because we were the same? It was an exciting prospect; I nearly tore the page from its binding in my eagerness for more.

Unfortunately I was interrupted by a knock on the door. I don't know why I felt the need to conceal it, but I slipped the journal behind a pillow just before the door opened. I fixed James a surly look, unhappy with his interruption. He challenged it with just a small, tentative smile.

"I didn't mean to intrude." He said by way of a peace offering.

“Because there is so much for you to intrude upon.” My voice came across huffy even to my own ears, and I made it a point to swallow some of my irritation. You’re here by your own choice now...play nice.

“That’s why I’m here,” James answered, looking out the window behind me. “I thought maybe you might want to take a walk in the gardens...get some fresh air?”

It was probably one of the last things I had expected him to say, yet it both excited and confused me. I hadn’t done something as quaint as take a walk in what felt like ages.

My suspicion must have been obvious because James laughed. From that one little sound, I learned more about him than he’d told me since I’d been here—I made him nervous. “It’s beautiful out,” He appealed.

I appraised him, tall and muscular, dark and intriguing, and made uncomfortable by me—a girl half his size. I’m sure this was not exactly a daily occurrence for him. He wasn’t my captor anymore. He didn’t control me. I didn’t want to be his friend, but I wanted him to realize that he didn’t have power over me. I wasn’t scared of him. That’s why we walked together through the massive home in awkward silence. Our footprints sounded like claps of thunder echoing through the empty halls...or maybe I was still scared of him.

I felt lighter immediately after we crossed into the twilight, as though the wind that brushed the hair from my shoulders was also lifting my troubles away. I closed my eyes there on the top step, drinking in this unhampered freedom, and when at last I reopened them it was to see James watching me. He looked away almost immediately, leaving whatever thoughts he’d had unspoken. It would have been an opportune moment to ask what he’d been thinking, but I was distracted by the glimpse of smile I caught before he could turn away.

His pace was casual enough that I was able to fall in stride with him, and we walked towards the fountain, lost in our respective thoughts. The absence of words was not at all as prominent as I had feared it would be, despite the never ending stream of questions that had become consciousness. A fringe of trees outlining the property seemed to sway along to the music of the wind whistling through the branches. It carried with it the promise of rain, an earthy scent with a note of something sweet that I couldn’t place, until I realized where James had led me.

When I looked out from my window, it was at the north end of the property, at a perfectly manicured garden, and those dancing trees in perfect lines. Now, however, we were facing the opposite direction, and it was even more beautiful than the view I'd become accustomed to. Here, hedges lined the property, tall and dark with wild white roses spilling out from the spaces between. The roses owned the hedges and they had for a while, their splendor taking over the vast expanse of greenery. Only darkness seemed to exist past the overgrown walls, but here everything was bathed in moonlight. Suddenly, I felt very small.

“Wow,” I breathed, in spite of myself.

“I’ve grown up with it,” James said, as if that made it any less special. “I would look out here just about every day, dreaming of what I could do for the people that exist outside the protection of these walls. With time, I guess it started to look more like a prison than a haven.”

“A haven.” I don’t know why I repeated it, but I liked the way the word felt on my tongue, light and full of promise. James stared out at it too, leaving me a moment to contemplate his words. Even surrounded by love and family, given the finer things in life and space to run, James had felt trapped. He’d grown up so different from me, and yet we had wound up essentially in the same place. “You don’t like it here?” I ventured.

“It’s my home.” He spoke the words like they were an explanation in themselves, but my confusion must have been obvious. A little sigh escaped him, and he turned to me. Up until then, I’d only been sneaking glances at him. But now he had captured my attention. “I love the people here, but I don’t like the walls. I don’t like being separated from the people I’m supposed to be protecting.” His face was an accurate portrayal of the dismay in his voice.

“It’s exquisite, though.” I leaned forward, enticed by the perfect white of one of the roses, and brushed my fingertips over the velveteen petals. James’ warning came a moment too late, telling me to stop after I’d already touched it, and I recoiled. My face burned, and I was fairly certain that even in the dark, he could tell. I considered apologizing, but my embarrassment was a quick segue into anger.

“Are you hurt?” James stepped closer with a hand outstretched, all business.

“No. Why would I be hurt?” I demanded. My pride was wounded, but I didn’t think that was what he meant.

“The roses. They didn’t burn you?”

“Of course not,” I snapped, because it was a stupid question. I turned my eyes back to the offending rose and glared at it as though it were to blame for my scorn.

“Not even a little?” James prodded.

“What do you care?”

He laughed, and I thought it was because I was wearing him thin with this negativity, but I caught the glint of amusement in his eyes as they appraised me. “You’re very intriguing.”

I held his gaze until it became uncomfortable and I had to look away. James shook his head, as if he had come to his senses, and stepped forward, cupping one of the roses between his fingers. “Wild moon rose. It’s the most potent to vampires. Although, I suppose you’re not really a vampire.” His eyes flitted over me, like he was still trying to figure out what I was. That made two of us. “It grows on the graves of the most devout, and it springs right from their ashes. It’s a sacred flower.” He pulled the rose just gently enough to remove the bud and after a moment’s admiration, he offered it to me and let it fall into my hand, careful to avoid my touch. He watched me, almost expectantly, and then turned away. “They were planted around the wall for our protection. But like I said, sometimes it’s hard to tell the difference between what we’re keeping in and out.”

I wasn’t convinced. “This whole place...it’s amazing.”

“It’s an illusion,” James explained. “We remove ourselves from the humans and the vampires, and then get upset when some become so comfortable behind these walls that they forget their role in life.”

“Which is what?” I ventured. He’d told me that they were the protectors of human, but in the modern world, what did that mean? Surely at one time the role had been literal, when the wolves had stood guard outside the family’s quarters like in the painting I’d seen the other day. Now, with the abundance of technology and the supposed superiority of the human race, what did it mean to them?

“To dedicate our lives in service of the humans,” He said. “Not to just be here as a line of defense or a safeguard against attack. We should be out there, as political leaders and teachers and well-intended strangers, shepherding humanity into leading moral lives, patrolling the streets, protecting innocence from evil—whether that is in the form of vampires or other humans.” The way he spoke with such unveiled passion appealed to my sense of curiosity. They were beautiful words, and he clearly meant them.

I bit my lip, but I couldn’t hold on to my thoughts any more than I could keep my words from coming out full of contempt. “Is that what you were doing the night you attacked me? Cleaning up the streets?”

He sighed. “We were having such a nice moment.” His lips faltered around a smile, before he really looked at me. “I don’t blame you for being bitter.” James’ eyes were honest and unashamed, not wavering under my accusation. “I would be.”

Bitter was not the kind of person I wanted to be. I’d been a lot of things—callous, weak, indifferent, and emotional; I didn’t want to be any of them. Leaving my father’s home had been my chance to start fresh, to cast off all the negativity I’d held onto for so long. The apology was on my tongue when James spoke again.

“The night I bit you, I was out of line. Julius and I had been in a fight just before we crossed paths with you. I knew he’d been out all night drinking, and I was on edge as it was.” His eyes had drifted to the sky, whether because eye contact was uncomfortable or because he was confessing his indiscretion to someone greater than me. “And then we ran into you and ...I still don’t know why I did it. I mean, I wanted to get Julius back before anyone noticed he was gone, and I wasn’t in the mood to deal with you...or rather, what I thought you were.”

It wasn’t really the answer I’d expected. I remembered seeing Julius in the diner, pinning a man to the wall by the collar of his shirt. Was James just cleaning up his brother’s mess?

While I was feeling more open to the idea of forgiving him, if James wanted my trust, he would have to earn it. “Why?”

His face was grim, and I noticed a very fine line around his mouth. He was surely just a little older than me, but it seemed that the inherent

stress of being the king's heir had weighed upon him. "Julius has a pure heart, but he is probably the most... intense person I know. I think that everything he feels is more acute, be it passion or misery. His highs are higher than mine...his lows are lower. He's been through a lot."

I was silent, reluctant to accept this as truth, because it would only make Julius more (for lack of a better word) human. Besides, he was royalty, born to a great destiny. What in his life could have possibly been hard? These people seemed to have everything: a comfortable lifestyle, a huge family, and the freedom I'd have killed for. And they were squandering it. I looked at the rose in my hand, twirling it by the stem.

"Julius is older than me by three years," James confessed. It was a funny admission, and it caught me off guard enough to look at him. His hands were in his pockets, and he was now looking back at the house as though he were expecting Julius to emerge from it. "The throne would have been his, under different circumstances."

I nodded, because that made sense. He did seem to have an awful big chip on his shoulder, and that sense of entitlement...

"I'm not sure it's a responsibility he ever wanted. I'm not sure any of us ever wanted it, to be honest. But my brother is very...unbalanced." He looked troubled. My mind turned immediately to thoughts of drugs and dependencies and mental illnesses. God willing, I wouldn't have to witness any of that. He was bad enough sober. "Julius acts on emotion instead of logic...he doesn't consider consequences or all of the options."

James made it sound like a bad thing...which, I guess for a King it would be. But it struck me that perhaps Julius and I were more similar than I wanted to believe. I too, reacted with emotion.

It was quiet as we both contemplated his words. The sun had dipped under the horizon a while ago, and while the sky was still a medley of pinks, the temperature had dropped with it. Shivering against the passing breeze, I wrapped my arms around myself and looked up at the few dimples in the sky, stars burning millions of miles away. I'd read once that they were all probably dead by the time their light reached us, but if that was true, then there was an understated beauty in death.

James looked too. I couldn't help but wonder if he was thinking the same thing as me.

We stayed like that for I don't know how long before James let out a long, low breath. I watched him from the corner of my eye, stretching his thick shoulders, rolling his neck. He offered me his hand. I stared at it in instant disdain, but when I looked up at him, it evaporated. There was no anger or disgust, no hatred in his eyes.

Tentative, I dropped my hand in his. A warmth spread through me then, and in its succession, a downy sense of peace.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I wouldn't exactly say we were friends, but there was a definite shift in the energy between James and I. It wasn't even as though we'd had a soul-bearing heart-to-heart last night. But something about the way we had shared the silence and the moon and the stars had changed things. I knew now that he wasn't as certain as he'd seemed from afar, and that even he felt like things were beyond his control despite his position of power. The fact that he'd told me anything at all about himself, about the person he was at his core, made it hard for me to hate him. And so throughout breakfast, I offered him pleasant and meaningless conversation and just-enough-to-be-polite smiles.

I hoped my new-found compliance would pave a path to the answers I wanted, but I didn't have a chance to ask for them. James was gone immediately after he stood, and Janna shepherded me to the side as soon as we exited the room. "I was hoping you'd help me with something." She smiled. I squinted at her, wondering what she could possibly need from me.

Twenty minutes later, we were walking through a darkness so obsolete I thought it may never end. She'd lead me to the indoor courtyard where I'd met with her father and told me only that she needed my help in the city before disappearing into the black tunnel. She didn't answer when I demanded she tell me why we were going there, and after a few moments of staring hesitantly into the infinite darkness, I followed. I caught up to her in just a minute, using her flashlight beam as a guide to her. That beam lit up the walls, smooth stone much like the one inside; I knew by the sloping path that we were headed underground and took a deep breath, trying not to think about it.

Water dripped steadily in the distance. It sounded like it was on the inside of my skull, a trickling echo that set me on edge. I turned to Janna, though there was nothing to see other than the back of her head. The tunnel was too narrow for the both of us to walk side-by-side. "What are we doing?"

She turned to appraise me, those soft eyes running languidly over all five and a half feet of me. “I’m giving you a reason to stay.”

“You’ve already given me a reason to stay,” I reminded her. “Although I’m not happy to have come into your brother’s life this way, I don’t think anyone deserves to die...which is what I gather will happen if we break the bond.”

Janna shook her head. “That’s just it, though. You’re staying out of guilt. You’re staying because you don’t want to be responsible for whatever the Hell comes after you leave. I want you to stay because you believe in the cause.”

“For someone so religious, you sure throw that word around easily.”

“Hell?” Janna laughed. “It’s just a word, Lilith. And I am NOT religious.” I gave her a look somewhere between surprised and confused, and she returned it with a laugh. “I’m spiritual. There’s a difference.”

“Sure.” I muttered, because this wasn’t a conversation that I was ever comfortable having; particularly not when I had to remind myself to breathe. The chances of the walls caving in were statistically low, right?

Janna wasn’t ready to let it go, though. “Tell me that you don’t believe in something greater than yourself...” She said it like a dare, but when I looked up from the ground she was watching me, incredulous.

“I don’t know what I believe in. I never have.”

“Well,” Janna straightened, the beam of her flashlight dropping as the path before us opened wider. The darkness began to recede; my heart raced with joy. “Maybe I can change your mind.”

The tunnel let out at the mouth of a cave, somewhere in the woods. I'd have said it looked familiar from my flight, but I'd be lying to myself since all the rocks and trees and dirt looked the same. Janna knew where she was going, and she walked confidently in the direction of horns blaring and cars whooshing by at speeds excessive enough to rattle the tree tops. Across the street was the very same diner I'd thought could serve as my refuge. My eyes flitted to the alley where James had attacked me. I glared at Janna, mouth open. "What are we doing here?"

Janna glanced around, and then her eyes fell on the diner sign. Her mouth formed an 'O' when she made the connection. "This is where...?" She shook her head. "Of course it is. Julius has a thing for the blonde waitress." She rolled her eyes. "Hey, that truck stop has nothing to do with this, ok? Come on."

We didn't cross the street; rather we stayed on our side of the road and walked for what felt like miles, until we came to an innocuous metal shelter, the size of a chicken coop. It smelled the way I imagined a chicken coop would. Fortunately I didn't suffer long, because a few minutes later a great big bus came to a noisy stop in front of us. I followed Janna on and she slipped enough coins into the machine for the both of us.

The bus didn't agree with me, which was fine since I didn't agree with it. We sat, knees pressed together, avoiding the disinterested eyes that glazed over us. The air seemed to have thickened once the doors closed, and with that it became hotter. The stench of so many people pressed so tightly together set my heart to pounding, which in turn set my head to throbbing. "Would you just answer my questions already?" I snapped.

Janna fixed me with a sideways glance, smiled at an elderly woman with her hair pulled under a plastic cap, and then stared straight ahead. I clenched my fists and released them. Janna was the closest thing I had to a friend; punching her would certainly jeopardize that. And on a moving vehicle with a few dozen spectators, it would also draw unwanted attention. I felt like a moving target as it was.

We stayed like that, squished onto a blue vinyl seat, as the woods gave way. Almost immediately after, buildings began to appear like out of a pop-up book, tall and glossy. Janna stood and I followed her off the bus,

tripping over the last step as the thing lurched, preparing to leave before I'd even made it off.

The noise was the first thing I noticed; it was immediate and all-encompassing, vibrating in the air. Horns and music and static and voices and the rushing wind all twined into one loud mess. The next was the smell...I didn't even know how to describe that, though it was not entirely unpleasant. "Welcome to the city." Janna smiled.

I tried not to look as disappointed as I felt. When I'd run from Xian, from my father, I'd thought the city would be my safe place. Though I'd never been, I expected it would magically solve all my problems. I'd disappear in the mesh of other people, find Samuel, and then go from there. And now, I was standing there in the heart of it all, knowing that my time had passed.

Janna took me all over the city, as if I were a tourist who cared to see the statues and be told what each building housed. I gave up on asking questions after we stopped for cupcakes not even twenty minutes after she bought us muffins from a little girl set up on her apartment steps. We ate a ridiculous amount of food, drank coffee, went to the mall, visited the theater, perused a tiny bookstore, and walked all over the damn place. And all the while, Janna dropped folded paper bills into musician's hats' and paid for other people's ice cream and bought scarves for a group of school girls admiring them from a street vendor. Despite what Janna had hoped for, I was not impressed by the city or her little acts of kindness.

Sure, the little boy to whom she gave the ice cream cone had acted like she'd given him a puppy and the woman she'd bought coffee for outside the bank had almost cried, but I didn't see how this stuff justified what she'd tried to pass off as God's work. Feeding people and buying them things they didn't really need was hardly what I would consider protecting humanity. And my feet hurt. I lamented all of this to Janna while we walked on an overcrowded sidewalk and she made eye contact with every stranger we passed.

"I'm not trying to impress you." She said. "I brought you because I need your help. All of this...the shopping and the bus and the cupcakes from Sweeties, all of that was for your benefit. You said you wanted a normal life...now it's too boring for you?"

I gave her a withering look, but she seemed undeterred. “Of all the people in the world, you needed me to hold your shopping bags?”

“No. I need your help with a woman.”

My stomach plummeted and I stared at her, wide eyed. “We’re not going to kill somebody?”

“What?” Janna laughed. “No. There’s something seriously wrong with you if that’s the first thing that comes to mind when I say I need your help. I need you to talk to this girl. She has more in common with you than me and...I think you’ll know what to say.”

Despite my suspicions, I followed her through the city for what felt like hours, getting run over by strangers in a hurry to get where they were going and running smack dab into people who stopped to consult maps. Finally we seemed to break away from the shops and the food carts and the musicians and artists, standing in the shadow of a massive grey building. Despite my hesitance, I followed Janna into the hospital and signed in to visit our ‘friend’ Katie in the ICU.

I was ready to leave the moment we got there...it was something in the air...bad vibes or the smell. A middle aged blonde lady with her hair in a severe bun demanded we follow her through a mess of turns, up three stories in the elevator, and through two pairs of doors that locked on the inside. She deposited us at the last door at the left end of the hallway and shuffled away wordlessly. I turned to Janna, ready to run, but she ducked through the door to a room before I could open my mouth.

The girl that lay in the hospital bed didn’t look like a girl. She didn’t even look like a person with her face purple and swollen. I stood, paralyzed, while Janna moved closer to her and grabbed her hand. Her eyes fluttered open...they were a really pretty light green like celery, but they were blood shot. She jumped a little. “Who are you?”

“I’m here to help you.” Janna had a soothing voice. I’d never really noticed it before, but when she wasn’t being ridiculously perky, she was instilling calm in others. Even people who woke up in a hospital bed with little memory of how they got there and found themselves looking at a stranger.

“I don’t know you?” But it was a question, and the girl didn’t seem sure of herself. I bit my lip, looking anywhere but at her unnaturally purple

face, and noticed that the room was absolutely sterile. Nothing gave the slightest indication that a person was even in that room, no flowers, no balloons, no cards. Just that girl in the bed, looking at Janna like she recognized her from some distant memory.

“We met once. I helped you before.” Janna took her hand. “I brought my friend, Lilith.”

I came closer at the mention of my name, and saw that the girl’s arm was in a sling. She appeared to have played chicken with a truck... or an angry bull. Even her hair, cropped short and unkempt, had blood in it. The sight made me feel weak. “Hi.” I waved.

“Who... are you?” Katie’s voice was raspy and wavered, as though it took a fair bit of effort to speak.

“Lilith is here because she wanted to tell you something.”

“I don’t know her.” Katie seemed like she may cry, her eyes brimming with confusion in the form of tears.

“It’s okay.” Janna soothed. She squeezed Katie’s hand and looked at me. “Tell her about Xian.”

My heart faltered, and I couldn’t be sure I trusted my own ears. The bedframe leant me support as I tried to catch my breath. And all the while, Janna just looked at me calmly, like we’d rehearsed this several times over and now this was opening night. I shook my head.

“Last time I saw you, you looked different...better. But you were crying. You wouldn’t remember me, since you’d had quite a lot to drink, but that’s okay. I remember what you told me...about your friend Cam.”

“Cam...?” She shook her head, then winced at the motion. “What about him?”

“You told me what he did to you.”

Katie bristled, her face tightening into what I imagine was supposed to be a neutral expression. It must have hurt, because she winced. “No.”

“Lilith,” Janna looked at me, pleading. “Please tell her about Xian.”

I didn’t know what Janna knew about Xian, or how she even knew his name. This was a topic I’d never broach, not with anyone, let alone a complete stranger. I shook my head, but the act felt like rattling my brain against my skull.

“Cam loves me.” Katie said. “We’ve been together forever.”

“And he wasn’t always so mean. But the man that you fell in love with is gone. Katie, I’m here because you’ve driven away all of your friends. It’s not easy to watch someone you care about tear themselves apart inside, and that’s what you’ve been doing for months.”

“You don’t know me.” Katie accused. Her eyes were sunken, and I realized just how small she looked. Her eyes, though black and blue and swollen, seemed very wide and childlike...was she younger than I? “And you don’t know Cam. He’s my best friend.”

“No,” Janna shook her head. “He’s killing you.”

“Katie,” I ventured. My voice trembled in time with my hands. What was I supposed to say? “You don’t have to defend him.”

“But...” Her lip wavered, a last line of defense before she let the sob loose. “I love him.”

“Did Cam put you here?” My stomach twisted. “Did he do this to you?”

Katie looked away, like she was trying to recall a memory. Or maybe she just couldn’t stand looking at me, a complete stranger asking intensely personal questions. When she finally spoke, it was a whisper so low I almost didn’t hear it. “He didn’t mean to.”

Her words shouldn’t have phased me. She shouldn’t have phased me. But I felt my throat constricting, and thought I may be in danger of crying too. “You don’t love him. If he is treating you like this, if he is allowing you to end up here like this, you don’t love him. And he doesn’t love you.”

As soon as the words left my mouth, I wished them back. They had been cruel, not the best way of dealing with a girl who was broken in every sense of the word. I turned to Janna. What were we even doing here? We needed to leave.

The tears finally began to fall, leaving smudges of makeup down her ruddy cheeks. Janna squeezed her hand, and then looked up at me and said in a whisper, “Keep going.”

“What?” I hissed. “You want me to torture her some more?”

“You’re getting through to her. Keep going.”

What else was there to be said? She was trying to delude herself into sticking around, making excuses to stay with this man that she had thought she loved. I couldn't honestly say whether she had loved him, and I doubt she could either. But I knew well enough that she thought she loved him, and that was just as strong. "Katie...you were right when you said I didn't know you. But I know your story, and it doesn't end well."

Katie looked from me to Janna, wide-eyed and breathless. "Can you...see the future?"

Janna shook her head gently. "No. But Lilith has a lot in common with you. She used to have a boyfriend that she thought she loved very much. But he hurt her. You don't hurt people you love, no matter what."

Hearing her talk about me like I wasn't there, like I'd given her that information to pass around freely, made something inside me snap. I looked at Katie, and suddenly, though I felt bad that she was in pain and confused and alone, I didn't feel any sympathy for her. "You will die if you stay with him, young and alone and probably too beat up for anybody to recognize you. He will kill you slowly and all at once if you stay with him, because people who abuse their friends don't change. He will thrive on the power you give him by letting him control you, and he will find new ways to hurt you. The only chance you have to save yourself is to walk away."

"I can't." Her voice was a mousy little squeak. "He'll kill me if I leave."

"He'll kill you if you stay." I snapped. "If you want to be someone's doormat, go ahead. But if you want to live your own life, if you want to know how much more there is, then you should walk away while you still can."

Katie stared at me with her mouth open, as though she'd been planning words, but couldn't make her tongue say them. She absolved into tears, shaking like a leaf in the breeze. I glared at Janna and strode from the room, throwing the door open so that the force of my anger could be transferred into it.

Janna caught up to me while I was waiting to be buzzed out of the Intensive Care Unit. "I don't know that I've ever been more proud." She grinned at me, flashing those insanely white teeth like I should be proud

too. I didn't know what I felt, but pride didn't even come close. "It was unorthodox," She shrugged. "But I think you finally got through to her."

"That's what you needed my help with? You wanted me to yell at a complete stranger for something that was beyond her control? You wanted me to tear her apart...for what? So that she can hate herself for letting herself be controlled by someone else, which is just going to make it easier for her to be controlled?" I shouldn't have lost my temper, but Janna had edged me towards it, almost like she anticipated it.

"No." Janna's voice stayed blessedly free of any emotion. "I wanted you to tear her apart so she doesn't have to do it herself. I wanted you to tear her apart so she can put herself back together, stronger than she was before. I wanted her to see that there is hope, that she can walk away and never look back. I've met Katie before...this is her third trip to the ER in the past two years since she's been with Cam."

"I don't know what you think you know about me. But trust me when I say that what I just said to her isn't going to miraculously make her find some strength she didn't know she had and leave with it. What I just said is going to make her hate herself for allowing somebody else to own her, for being foolish enough to love a monster in the first place."

Janna grabbed my wrist, causing me to face her with unconcealed anger. She didn't waver under it as I'd hoped she would. Actually, she seemed to stand a little taller. "Maybe it will. Maybe she will hate herself so much that she will consider ending her life. Maybe she will hate herself so much that she will consider taking his. Either way, she isn't going to go back to that apartment that they share together and get pushed down the stairs for not spending her last ten dollars on beer." She began to walk away from me, so that I almost didn't hear her say, "At least she isn't going to be a victim anymore."

"Really?" I sneered. I couldn't expect her to understand it, and I wouldn't have needed her to if she didn't insist on being right when she had no practical experience in the matter. "Walking away doesn't undo whatever damage he's already caused. It doesn't change who she is."

"You're wrong." Janna said. "She will never be the same as she was before she met you. You've just changed the course of someone's life and you refuse to see it. It may not seem like much to you, but she won't die because an old guy friend texted her asking how she was. I don't know

where her path leads from here and I don't need to know. But don't you dare tell me that we didn't make a difference. This is what we do, Lilith.

Not grand, ostentatious acts like throwing yourself in front of a bus or running into a burning building. Our faces and names should not be remembered, nor should the things we say. But the way that we make people feel, paying for their coffee and giving them warmth on a chilly day, and making them realize they are worth more than they think...those things are what we do to preserve peace. Those are the things we do to save the humans. I'm sorry if you were expecting something more, but that is all I have to offer. And to me, that is enough. Because you were wrong, Lilith. Katie is different now, thanks to you. Maybe you didn't see it, maybe you didn't feel it, but she did quit being a victim, as easily as if she were quitting a dead-end job. She quit being a victim, and she became something far greater, something you refuse to see even in yourself. She is a survivor." □□

I refused to talk to Janna the whole way home, mostly because I knew she would try to pretend that my cold shoulder was not driving her mad. She led me through a shortcut, making idle chatter all the way, and casually told me that this way was dangerous, that her brother's had forced her to quit taking this path. But what James didn't know wouldn't hurt him, she said, and besides, nobody would mess with me in my current state. I was still very much disappointed in what she had gotten me to say. I was even more disappointed that James had told her about Xian. It was the only way she could know, and yet it didn't even make sense for James to know that much.

Despite Janna's shortcut, which didn't feel any shorter than the original route and lead us above ground and back under, through three short tunnels and lots of overgrown trees, it was dark when we got back. James was standing on the steps, arms crossed, almost as if he had been waiting for us to return. His eyebrows were knitted together, a look that made him even more unreadable than usual. Concern, perhaps? When he blocked our path inside, I realized he had, indeed, been waiting for us. "Janna." His voice was firm, disapproving. "Where were you?"

"I took Lilith out for a day in the city." She shrugged and held up the bags; I wondered whether she'd dragged me into the mall just to produce some proof when her over-protective brother started asking questions.

"You've been shopping all day?"

"You've been waiting for me all day?" She challenged. "Lilith is free to go whenever and wherever she wishes. I thought a day out would be a nice change of pace for her."

James' eye sharpened on her, and Janna straightened a little. Their family drama didn't appeal to me; I moved to push past James. He stepped in front of me at the last second, so that I ran into him. Our collision knocked me off my balance, but he steadied me, and with a hand still on my arm, asked me, "Are you okay?" The weight of his touch was strange, different than it had been before.

Was I okay? I considered the question a moment too long, wondering whether he actually cared. I stood on an uncomfortable plane of existence with him, teetering somewhere in the unknown. Did I hate him still for the circumstances that had drawn us together, or had our brief

tolerance of each other changed things? I appraised him, trying to see what exactly those eyes were hiding. He offered me no lead, maybe because he didn't know how we should treat each other either.

"I'm fine." He watched me hesitantly, and then let go. I pushed past him and took the stairs two at a time. Just before I opened the door, I heard him ask his sister in a low voice what she had done to me. Janna's reply was swallowed when it closed.

I flopped down on my bed, trying to imagine them talking about me. What had James said to her, about Xian? How had he figured it out? I didn't like the idea of them sitting together, discussing my past, my present, and my future, all without me. Janna wanted me to berate Katie for not taking control of her life, wanted me to be all the proof Katie would need that you could walk away and live to talk about it. But I had walked away, I had taken control of my life, and it still felt as out of control as ever.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I slept well into the morning, showered, and curled onto the window seat with the diary of the stranger, allowing the words of a dreamer to wash over me. It was how James found me.

“Lilith?”

I jumped at his sudden intrusion and felt my face redden at having been caught. He moved closer, his tentative smile slipping when his eyes fell on the book I’d slammed shut. “Where did you get that?” His voice quivered just the slightest bit, with something I couldn’t name...anger? But I’d been witness to his anger. This was different, whatever it was. It did not scare me as his rage had; instead it sparked my curiosity.

“It was on the bookshelf.” I gestured vaguely to the corner, but his eyes stayed trained on me.

James held out an upturned hand and with great reluctance, I relinquished it. The way that he eyed the book, as though it were some evil form of witchcraft, only made my curiosity grow. “You know who wrote that,” I accused.

“Yeah,” He agreed, turning it over in his hands. His voice was distant, his mind in another place. “I do.”

“Who?” I demanded. “Was it another person that you trapped here?” James was quiet. “Was it another prisoner?” I repeated, my voice rising with the indignation of that idea.

“What?” James looked up, his face a mask of confusion. “No, of course not.”

“Well it sure sounded like it...”

Seemingly coming back into himself, James shook his head and tucked the book away within his jacket. “I thought we could have lunch.” He was very obviously changing the subject. I didn’t want to be pleasant or have lunch with him...not after he’d taken the journal from me and withheld information I so desperately needed. But he was here, and he was making an effort. So I would too.

I'd expected to take our lunch in the massive dining hall, but he led me outside. It was a beautiful day, unusually warm given the recent weather. We walked past the gardens and as we strolled through the grounds, I inhaled the scents once again that trailed on the wind, growing stronger as we drew nearer to the rose wall. James led me through the break in the hedges, and I hesitated for a moment.

I didn't yet know his intentions. He'd attempted to bargain with my life, he'd bitten me, and he'd kept secrets. And now he was leading me away from the house with the expectation that I blindly follow him through the shrubs. It wouldn't be the worst decision I'd ever made, but I didn't know what awaited me inside.

Answers.

James read my uncertainty and offered me a hand. Even in the crisp afternoon, the warmth that it offered was enticing. His fingers laced through mine when I took it.

The temperature only dropped as we descended into the path lined by the tall bushes, the weak sun spilling into the corridor from far above. I was grateful to have him standing close, to be able to appreciate the warmth that rolled off him in waves, and stepped a tiny amount closer. He didn't give any indication that he noticed.

It wasn't until we turned at the end of that path and were met with a fork in the shrubs that I realized we were not sandwiched between simply crafted walls of shrubbery, but in the middle of something bigger...a labyrinth. My heart hammered at the idea of what this could mean, but I couldn't bite back my surprise. "It's a maze."

Of course he knew that, but I couldn't help stating the obvious.

"The whole property is built around it," He nodded. "The moon rose serves as protection from the vampires. The maze...well, I guess you could say that's more of a protection from humans."

I didn't question it, but then, I didn't need to. Just as the vampires needed their own brand of protection against the humans, so did the werewolves. Whereas father had attained his protection through isolation and myths of curses and ghosts, the werewolves had attained theirs through

a maze of shrubs, which undoubtedly obscured the house from view and offered a sort of deterrent for the general population.

“There are stories that have been passed down for centuries,” James explained. “About this maze. It has been said that once you enter it, you’ll never be seen again. It has prompted a few brazen young adults over the years to venture in here...mostly lovers seeking a thrill in the night.”

“And were they ever seen again?” Malice slipped into my voice like a knife through butter; effortlessly.

James laughed. “They all made it safely home again, after wandering endlessly through the maze and being convinced they would starve to death. Some experienced hikers have gotten hopelessly lost in here...it has certainly helped tame the desire for anyone to come explore. The moon rose...well, I wouldn’t say it’s a drug...but it has been said to produce some pretty terrifying imaginings.”

I gave one of the buds special consideration as we passed, trying to imagine how something so small, so seemingly innocuous, could serve as a poison. How could this little rose bud protect them against the likes of Xian, of my father, and how did they have so much faith in it?

Several turns later, we reached a narrowing of the corridor, at the end of which there was an archway weighed down with flowers. I followed James through it, entranced by the unimaginable beauty of the blossoms, so that I did not immediately notice the bistro table set upon the concrete, bearing a small but delightful spread of food. It looked deceptively romantic, but this was my enemy. We could barely even look at each other. Surely this wasn’t a date?

I turned suspicious eyes upon James as he pulled out one of the chairs and waited for me to sit before positioning himself opposite me. He smiled as though in response to my unspoken questions. “I hope this doesn’t seem too forward, but I thought that perhaps it was time we really get to know each other.”

“Oh?” I glanced over the courtyard, at the practically enchanted flowers and the charming table. It was deceptively sweet. And naturally, that was cause for alarm.

“I don’t mean to pry,” He explained. “But I know there are many things left unspoken between us. We can’t go on acting like nothing more

than passing strangers.”

My suspicion couldn’t be explained away that easily. “Well, if its trade secrets you’re after, you’ve got the wrong girl. You saw firsthand, I mean nothing to them.” I meant it as a joke but there was hint of suspicion in my voice that stopped it from sounding too innocuous.

“I’m not after trade secrets, Lilith.” The sincerity in his voice was a reflection of what I found in his eyes. “I brought you here because this has always been my favorite place to go, whenever I was overwhelmed or angry or sad. This courtyard has seen every side of me there is, and I just figured that it was the best place for me to become vulnerable to you.”

“You want to become vulnerable to me?” It was a strange thing for him to say. I thought of how he refused to show any kind of emotion around me...how he was quiet and sparse. It was even stranger for me to try and understand, as I’d spent my entire life safeguarding against any hints of vulnerability.

“I want you to trust me,” James urged. “If that means telling you everything about me, that’s what I’ll do. I hope that you would reciprocate.”

I opened my mouth, prepared to tell him that he’d better not hold his breath, but ended up saying, “You can try.”

“Thank you.”

Busying myself with buttering my toast served as a good distraction, but after a moment of silence I had to look up and meet his eyes, which were upon me with a level look. “What?” I demanded, immediately feeling my walls rise a little.

“There are so many things I want to ask you.” The honesty of the statement was a little disarming, but I straightened.

“You first.”

James nodded. Even he knew it was only fair that he try to give me some answers about this tangled mess that was my life. “What do you want to know?”

What did I want to know? Ha. It was probably easier just to ask what I didn’t want to know. Even so, I gave voice to the first thought that

crossed my mind. It was probably the one inconsequential question I had, but all the same, it had been bothering me.

“The first time I had dinner with you, there was a girl. Janna told me her name was...Delia?”

“Delilah.” He corrected. His voice was flat but patient and I suspected Delilah was not a subject he enjoyed discussing.

“Yes. Janna told me something I didn’t understand. She thinks, perhaps, that Delilah was...is... jealous of me.” Just saying that made my face heat up, and I squirmed uncomfortably in my chair as I waited for an answer.

James shrugged. “I’m sure that is probably true. Janna has always been better at discerning those sorts of things than I.”

It was the answer I’d expected, but not the one I’d wanted. “Why?”

James broke eye contact, turning to examine the flowers climbing the trellis without really seeing them. “There are several possible reasons, Lilith. I’m not an adolescent-minded girl, so I couldn’t really tell you.”

“You know something.” I prodded.

A sigh escaped him, and I watched his hands lock together. I hadn’t realized that they were quite rugged, or at least more-so than I expected from someone who claimed to be royalty. I wondered what he did in his spare time, if maybe the scratches and dirt were from gardening. Would that make him more likeable, or less? It certainly would give me something to tease him about, but I doubted that if he did garden he would care if I mocked him for it. “This wasn’t what I had imagined we’d be discussing. But the most obvious answer is one I suspect you could have gleaned on your own by simply looking in a mirror.”

My stomach tightened at the mention of a mirror, thoughts darting to the pale crescent-shaped marks on my neck. The ground through the glass table top suddenly seemed extraordinary, and I stared at it, my cheeks hot even though a gust of wind slapped them.

“You’re beautiful.” It wasn’t what I had expected, and my head swiveled up, my eyes accusing him of lies. He seemed sincere, but I laughed. “It’s true.” He said a little more forceful than necessary. “Delilah is desirable,” For some reason, his admission actually caused me a twinge of jealousy, and I looked away again in an effort to conceal that fact from

him. I did not know the meaning of it...I didn't need him trying to decipher that reaction. "But you have a sort of radiance, Lilith, that is all your own. You draw every eye to you, and I know you can't see it, but it's certainly something to be envied."

I shook my head, unable to understand how that long-legged girl with silky hair and caramel eyes could envy me, her polar opposite of plain and pale and dull. Frankly, it wasn't even something I wanted to discuss. I switched tack, sorry I'd even brought it up. "Ok. What did you tell your sister about me...and Xian?"

"Xian?" He blinked. "Who is that?"

Who is that? I stared at him, but he didn't seem to be bluffing. I didn't know how to answer that question. "The man the other day...when you took me back to the vampires."

"Oh." His face soured a little. "The one you kissed? I assume he's your boyfriend." He looked down at his tea swirling around at the bottom of his mug, but glanced back up in time to see my face absolve into disgust.

"No." I said. I shuddered, because the thought of returning to that was truly revolting. I thought of Katie.

"I didn't mention anything to Janna about him. I had basically forgotten about him. Why?"

He seemed to be telling the truth. And if he didn't know, I wasn't about to tell him. "The diary. You know who that belonged to." I gestured towards the inside of his coat, where that book was tucked away like a secret that James didn't want me to know about. He wanted to be vulnerable to me, and I to him, but it was clear that that wasn't in the cards today.

James tensed an infinitesimal amount, but I noticed it all the same. He spoke with an air of finality, making it obvious that he would say nothing more on the matter. And he didn't have the chance, because just before I could say anything more, Janna burst into the courtyard, breathless.

"It's Julius!" She panted, and without needing to hear anything more, James tore out of the courtyard at a speed I'd have never expected possible.

I looked at Janna a moment longer, and then stood up in a daze. “There’s a vampire out there, Lilith.” There was something in her eyes that I couldn’t identify. Storm clouds seemed to move through them, pushed through by the fury of her thoughts. She was connecting the dots, recognizing the man she’d somehow heard of with the one she’d just seen. “He said he came for you.”

My mouth went dry. Speak of the devil, and he shall come. “Xian?”

“Come on,” She grabbed my hand and led me in a hurry back through the labyrinth, until we emerged in an expanse of land that seemed unfamiliar to me. The forest was across from us.

I saw him leaning against an oak tree, its branches encapsulating him in their shade so that I couldn’t see his face...until he noticed me and took a step forward. He was too far away to be certain, but he seemed to be smiling as though something were about to happen. He had a terrible poker face, if nothing else...in that snide look, he showed me his cards.

I stood paralyzed with fear, and looked for James. That’s when I noticed the giant wolves racing toward Xian, who widened his stance, braced for the attack. “Stop!” I breathed, but it was not nearly as loud as I’d intended.

I recognized James as the dark wolf gaining on the one in the lead. He pounced, throwing himself onto Julius’ back. The wolves slowed, Julius encumbered by the heavy shape of his brother trying to drag him back. Janna watched, motionless. The terror on her face spurred me to action.

I chased after them, trying to make it to Xian before they could. James was strong, I’d found out first hand, but Julius had the advantage of rage, and he used it to throw James to the ground with enough force to leave him down for a few seconds.

Those few seconds were all Xian needed to close the distance between us. He wrapped an arm around my throat, pulling me into the distantly familiar hollow of his body.

“Missed me?” Xian crooned.

I tried in vain to shake him off, but his arm just tightened around my neck...a reminder of how effortlessly he could snap it.

“Let her go!” Janna yelled.

James stalked forward but stopped when Xian jerked me back with him. “Everybody stays where they are!” He commanded.

“What do you want?” Janna seemed to be speaking on everyone’s behalf, as the men were still in wolf form and I certainly couldn’t get a word in with his heavy arm threatening to collapse my windpipe.

“I’m here to re-negotiate the terms you filthy animals brought to us last week. I’d like to speak to someone in charge. Perhaps you could fetch your daddy or something.” His voice dripped with ire. He was baiting her.

But Janna was not like most girls that Xian was used to. She was not like me. Instead of giving him the reaction he wanted, she blinked. “I am in charge. But if you want my dad, he’s right there.” She nodded at a large white wolf who stood next to James, his mouth pulled back in a snarl.

I hadn’t seen this wolf yet, but even if Janna hadn’t admitted as much, I’d have known it was the king.

He could hear everything that was being said, and I imagined he didn’t like this arrogant young man speaking that way to his daughter.

I couldn’t see Xian’s expression, but I imagine that he was amused by the exchange. “Have we met before? You look so familiar...I think it’s the eyes.”

The King did not seem to share Xian’s amusement. His steadfast gaze did not falter, trained for attack.

“There are no negotiations to take place.” Janna was infuriatingly calm. My eyes flicked to James, who stood with every muscle in his body tensed, his hair sticking up straight.

“Oh, do you think?”

“I know.” She smiled ruefully. “After your last encounter, my father and Arich have cleared the air. Lilith is a free woman, and the treatise between our kinds stands. Although, you being here...your hands on her...it’s a breach in the accords. I wonder what Arich would have to say on the matter?”

I’d never been in immediate danger...Xian made that much clear as soon as he loosened his hold on me and pushed me from him. I stumbled, grateful to be out of his reach, and righted myself next to Janna in time to

see the smirk that only affected half of his face. “Something tells me you’re bluffing, little one.”

“I guess you’ll find out when you return home. You’d best hurry...” She pointed with her chin towards the sky, where the darkness was beginning to break away. “You don’t want to be caught after hours. That’s another violation, you know?”

Xian held his hands up, still amused as ever. “I concede... For now.”

I looked at Janna, short and slight, but also stolid and imposing. She was a neatly wrapped contradiction, offering kindness to all but giving looks that could have been lethal. Now I could see it clearly...much of her was like her father. She had the same warm eyes, the same charmed laugh, and also his good nature. But she was not only her father’s daughter...in the moonlight, I could see very clearly the part of her that was her mother. It was imperial and regal and it suited her.

Xian winked at me. “It’s not over ‘til it’s over, love. Which, likely, will be sooner than you think.”

“Why would he just come here like that?” Janna asked, looking to her brother. She was used to him having the answers to all her questions, but this time James had nothing to offer her.

He shook his head.

“Because,” I bit my lip. “Everything he does, he does for a reason...even if it’s just because he can.”

The King looked to his wife, whose pinched face was livid. “Am I the only one who didn’t know you’ve been in contact with Arich?”

“I didn’t know.” Julius arched an eyebrow in his father’s direction, hoping to elicit an explanation. The queen turned shrewd eyes to her other son.

“I didn’t know either.” James said. Unlike his brother, he didn’t seem at all fazed that he’d been excluded. But I favored his mother on this one...why had the King of the werewolves and the Lord of Vampires been in communication?

“It was never a secret.” The king shrugged. “I’d not go to any lengths to hide the information, but I suspected it was a matter you would want no hand in.”

“But you entrusted our daughter with it?”

I squirmed in my chair, made uncomfortable by the sound of the queen’s voice echoing through the chamber. Without the dozens of people chattering away or the clinking of silverware, the hall was strangely silent and much too large for only the five of us.

“I’ve entrusted our daughter with the duties of a Queen, which she may one day be.”

“Nonsense.”

“Calista...” The King looked at his wife with soft eyes, and I with judgmental ones. She was maybe fifty, devastatingly beautiful, and yet childish in demeanor. Her face was always severe, particularly now.

“This is not the time or place for the discussion,” Her cold eyes darted towards me. If only she could understand I didn’t want to be in her presence any more than she wanted to be in mine. “But I do believe you owe it to us to explain whatever your amended terms are with the undead.”

“Allow me,” Janna stood, her dark curls falling around her face. “I actually have been the one negotiating them.”

“You what?” The queen shrieked, at the same time Julius yelled “I knew it!”

“I broached the King of the damned on our behalf and apologized.” She did not seem the slightest bit perturbed that her mother was looking at her, jaw unhinged. “James and Julius were out of line to make such demands and try to trade her life. Arich is a prideful man...he needed to know that we wouldn’t try to insult him any further.”

“Janna...” James didn’t seem to know what to say, beyond that. “That is...incredibly stupid.”

“No.” The king stirred his coffee, spoon clanking against mug. That was the only sound until he spoke again. “It was incredibly brave, and perhaps even misguided. But it was not stupid. We have an assurance of her life...despite her treachery, they will not disturb her while she is with us.”

“Those are the terms you negotiated?” Julius snorted. “You’ve clearly got your priorities mixed up.”

“You’re wrong, I’m afraid.” The king glanced at his daughter, willing her to explain further.

“James bit her. They are matched now, and if anything were to happen to her, there’s no saying what would happen to James.”

Calista pressed her temples between her hands, hard enough that I suspected she may be trying to telepathically communicate with Janna.

“The truth is,” The king looked at his wife, and then to me. “No one knows what lies in store for Lilith, but she has crossed James’ path, and that is good enough reason to keep her safe. I suspect there is more at play than the delicacies of war and politics.”

The queen pursed her pale lips together, and let her long lashes flutter closed a few times while trying to summon patience. “You’ll excuse me...I’ve a migraine.”

The look she gave me was rife with hatred, poorly concealed, and when she stood she did not offer anything more to her family before stalking out of the room. Somehow even that was a majestic movement.

“There’s no reason to believe that Lilith’s death will have any effect upon James at all.” Julius glanced at his father, as if for reassurance.

“There’s no reason to believe it won’t.” Janna countered. “And so, if Lilith will stay, we will protect her to the best of our capabilities.”

James, who had been more or less a spectator since he’d walked in with his brother and father, now ventured to speak. “There are no guarantees in life but death. However, Lilith is my responsibility, and I will protect her regardless. If the amended accord is violated again, for any reason, I won’t hesitate.”

The king nodded. “I would expect nothing less.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The next dream I woke from, I had been chained to James, linked by a thick industrial steel that made it hard to move. Xian had a hold of me, though, and he pulled so roughly that it was as though I'd tear in two. When I fell to the ground it swallowed me whole, and I lay in a coffin, with James tethered to the shallow grave above me. Though he pulled and strained and beat the ground and took the Lord's name in vain, he was unable to break free.

Guilt and confusion and anger chased away the disorientation of a deep sleep, leaving in its wake a whirlwind of emotion. It swirled within me, commanding me to action, but how was I to act upon it?

“You must be lost.” Julius graced me with a quick once-over, not bothering to hide the smirk on his face. His head poked out from behind the door frame, which he seemed to lean heavily on. “James’ room is on the second floor.”

“I wasn’t looking for James.” I craned my neck a little, trying to sneak a peek inside his room. Was he alone? God, I hoped so.

“The plot thickens.” He eyed me shrewdly, like he expected an attack. But when I stood still, he moved aside and bid me to enter.

I swallowed, hoping my fear wasn’t as obvious as his suspicion. Julius kicked the door shut and cocked an eyebrow, imploring me to explain my interruption. He crossed his arms, expectant, and I realized he was shirtless. Yeah, Of course.

“I...” I looked over his shoulder, hoping he didn’t realize how uncomfortable I was. “I need your help.”

“You think I’d honestly help you?” He laughed at the very idea of it.

“I do, actually. I think you might even find my proposition intriguing.”

He laughed again, crossing the room to a small fridge in the corner. Now that I looked around, my discomfort only seemed to grow. It's not that his room was odd or distasteful, but the full implication of my being here suddenly seemed too cloying. I glanced at the unkempt bed, the silky sheets, and straightened.

He poured himself a glass of something dark, and then turned his gaze back on me. "And what makes you say that?"

"Because," I shrugged. "I know you don't like me, and I thought you'd appreciate the chance to kick my ass."

"Oh? Tell me more."

"I don't know how to explain it to you. I think there's a war on the horizon...I don't think that the bargain your sister made with my father will hold any water. They're going to come for me...and when they do, I want to be ready."

"What makes you so certain? You were there that day your father told us to take you and disappear."

"Yes, and you were there the day Xian said he'd never let me go. You were there today, when he told me it's not over. You cannot understand the relationship we had, because even I don't understand it, but you can help me learn to fend him off. I just...I need to do something physical."

"There are other physical things we could do," he quipped, nodding toward the bed.

I shook my head. "This was a mistake." My fingers were already wrapped around the doorknob by the time he stopped me with a hand on my arm, much gentler than previous occasions when he'd shepherded me about.

"No, it's not." I looked up at him, uncertain. He seemed ready to confess to something, and it made my nerves only wilder. "I was there the day he kissed you under the stairs...the day he slapped you."

I tried not to hold his gaze, because I didn't think sympathy from him would sit well with me. But it wasn't pity there in his obsidian eyes...it was understanding. "We'll start tonight."



An echo of my earlier thoughts played a continuous chorus in the back of my brain as I waited for Julius at the mouth of the maze: *this is a mistake*. I, of course, hadn't really thought it out before I approached him with the idea, and now that I thought more and more about what I'd done, I realized it was a fool's errand. But it was too late to run, because the door opened and Julius stepped into the brisk night.

He was dressed all in black, his sleeves rolled up to the elbow. He seemed better suited for a jewel heist than a sparring lesson. His eyes washed over me, followed by a grin. "You ready to have your night wrecked?"

I swallowed my fear. "I wouldn't have asked you to help if I wasn't ready." "We'll see about that. Follow me."

I did follow him, but not without asking myself why I was. Why had I gotten myself into this mess anyways? And why him?

The answer was obvious. I couldn't let them fight my battles for me. They may have started their own feud with Xian by their misguided hostage attempt, but my feud with Xian went farther back...it cut deeper. I didn't want to die, and I did not even want Xian to die. I just didn't want to have to see him ever again.

But he'd as good as guaranteed that I would, and so this time, when he came for me, I was not going to go without a fight. I still didn't know the nature of my relationship with James, but I knew that whatever it was or whatever it would become, it would never be this. Julius seemed to possess a raw hatred for me, but he was too good to act on it. He would put me through my paces, and I would hate him and he would hate me, and just maybe we would come off better for it.

"You're late."

"You'll live." Julius stepped aside as we entered into the vast expanse of lawn, where only the day before Xian had teased us with idle threats. Delilah stood in the center of the lawn, her arms crossed, long hair swept back into a ponytail that swayed at her waist.

I shot Julius a look of accusation as it dawned on me why she was there. "She'd going to train me? Seriously?"

Julius laughed, rubbing an apple against his shirt. He didn't seem the slightest bit affected by my irritation. "You didn't truly think I'd hit a girl? My mother would wash my mouth with soap for even thinking of it... although, she'd probably make an exception for you."

"Are you scared?" Delilah taunted. Her entire, pretty face was pulled into a sneer. She actually looked down the bridge of her nose at me, as she would something that disgusted her.

I blinked. "Of course not. But I don't know why you're here. You don't even like me."

"*Nobody* likes you," She amended. "But we're stuck with you, so we'll share the burden. Julius asked me to help you. I'm here at his bequest."

"Fine." I squared my shoulders, lifted my chin, and took a few steps toward her.

She seemed barely able to contain her excitement, her mouth puckering around more bitter quips kept at bay. I wanted to knock the smile right off her face, but I only blinked, waiting.

"Werewolves are warriors. We are trained to fight...to win at any cost. *You*...you are not trained. You run because it is all you can do, and it's not even very advantageous."

"I'm not running."

"You will be."

The words had barely left her lips before she lunged at me. There was no time to really process what she was doing; I stepped to the side, causing her to miss. "Still running." She straightened, flicking her hair off of her shoulder. "You can't stay still and face me head on?"

I could. I had all the time, with Xian. But that had been to quell his fury...he always felt bad after over-reacting, and so he would hit me, and I would stay still and not blink and then it would be over. If I'd fought back, who knows how long we would have lasted? Delilah was different...I wouldn't stay still just to let her hit me.

This time, when she darted at me, I grit my teeth and stayed motionless until the last moment when her fist was swinging at my face. I reached up and caught it with my hand. It stung, but it was arguably better than taking

the same fist to the jaw, and Julius seemed mildly impressed by it anyways. Delilah did not. In fact, it only seemed to irritate her.

“Some people say that the best offense is a good defense.” She looked me over, assessing my strengths, looking for weaknesses. “Those people are wrong. You’re not going to do yourself any good if you get captured... which you’re prone to do, by not attacking your attackers. Chances are you will always be outmatched. There will always be somebody faster... smarter...” I stood my ground, watching her every footfall as she walked a tight circle around me, preparing for attack. “Stronger.” She made her move, a quick jab for the ribs. I doubled over, effectively blocking her. She was not pleased...I suspected she thought that agreeing to help Julius meant getting to use me as a punching bag. “Sometimes, you will be outnumbered.”

Julius came from nowhere. My attention had been so focused upon Delilah that I’d all but forgotten he was there. Until he looped his arms under mine, trapping me and offering Delilah the chance she needed to get her punch in. But before her fist could connect with my nose, Julius released me and his hand flew into the air, catching her punch. He knocked it effortlessly out of the air, leaving Delilah to look at him, bewildered.

“You aren’t here to exact vengeance.” The look she gave him told me she’d been lead to believe otherwise. “Besides, if you get her face, James will know we’re up to something.”

“And? James doesn’t scare me.”

I was catching my breath, still watching her warily, as though she may just decide to launch herself at me out of random. I’d not put it past her. But the opportunity was too sweet to miss. “No, I’d expect not. What about his disappointment? Does that scare you?”

“I’m not sure where you’re going with this...” Delilah’s voice held a warning, but no threat.

“I think you know what I’m implying. I’ve heard a whisper or two... about your thing for James? You’ve always held a candle for him, isn’t that right?”

She snarled...literally *snarled* at me. Her hand twitched at her side. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Maybe not.” There was, as far as I knew, nothing between James and myself. Unless you considered the fact that he’d bitten me, which was their version of a blood oath, and we were now inextricably tied together. But Delilah suspected there was, and that was enough to provoke her. She charged at me again, and this time Julius did not stop her. He actually stood with his arms crossed, smirking, far too entertained by our interaction.

I meant to side-step her again, to let her wear herself down and then maybe...just *maybe*...try and get in one good hit on her. But she was genuinely angry at my insinuations of her unrequited love...She faked left, I went right, and she followed. Her punch caught me in the ribs, and though it was enough to knock the air out of my lungs, it wasn’t as heavy as I had anticipated. Still, it gave her the chance to strike again, which she was more than happy to do...she followed it with a series of jabs, some making their mark and others misplaced. I danced out of her reach, ducking and taking cover, and throwing myself at her and feinting in her direction.

Julius let us carry on like that for a few moments, before finally stepping between us and shaking his head. “Nothing like a girl fight.” He winked at me. “I’m sure James would be honored to have you fighting over him, and as entertaining as this has been, you’ve been at it long enough. Give it a rest.”

Delilah crossed her arms. “You’re going to need your sleep.” She said. “That was only your warm up. We’ll pick back up where we left off, same time tomorrow.”

My days continued on like that, not entirely eventful. I would see them at breakfast. Sometimes Janna would linger so that we could talk, and other times she would hurry off without even telling me goodbye. James seemed even more stand-offish than before, presumably the result of realizing that no good came from my being here. We had spoken maybe five words to each other since the day Xian had come onto their property. At night, I met Julius and Delilah. I got my ass handed to me sometimes, and other times I managed to skate away, completely untouched. Those nights, Delilah hurried off.

“You can’t always run. You can’t always hide.” Delilah’s hawk-eyes were narrowed on me, her prey.

“I haven’t been.” I had run in the past. I had hid in the past. Not anymore. My hands were up, ready at my chest to catch hers should she try to turn them upon me.

“You haven’t been fighting. You’ve been defending.”

“That’s all I need.”

“No,” Delilah spat. “It’s not. Why am I wasting my time with you? What are you here for?”

I looked at Julius, sitting with his back against a tree trunk. He was reading a book...or at least, he was reading it in between glances. At the moment, his eyes peeked above it. I had no doubt he was smirking behind that cover. “I’m not going without a fight.”

“Going?” She frowned. “Going where?”

“With Xian.”

“Who?” Delilah let her stance drop, turning to Julius expectantly. “What is she talking about?”

“Xian? He’s nothing to worry about...” He set his book aside. “Unless you’re Lilith.”

Delilah looked between us. Her eyes probed Julius’ face for more, and then they sidled over to me. “Is there something I should know?”

“My life doesn’t concern you.” I crossed my arms.

“I thought I was teaching you to fight...I thought you were at least going to try to be productive around here. You’re telling me this has all

been for nothing?” Julius was on the verge of receiving her wrath. She looked in danger of punching him.

“You’ve done well, Delilah. But she’s not as meek as she looks...or acts. I think we’re done here.”

“What?” Delilah and I spoke the word in unison. Apparently, we did agree on something.

Julius shrugged. “Lilith wanted to learn to defend herself. She knew how to do that all along, it would seem. Your trainings haven’t taught her anything, but perhaps now she’ll be more ready to use them in the future.”

“We’ve been at this for four days...why? So she could feel better about herself?” Delilah’s voice was getting dangerously loud.

“It’s not really your concern,” Julius cocked his head, like he was trying to understand why she was so upset. “Move along.”

She set her jaw, but did as he suggested and left, spewing a stream of profanity along the way. I looked to Julius for answers, but he didn’t have much to offer. “Come with me.”

I followed him, though I didn’t know where. We’d been alone enough the last week that if he was going to kill me, he’d have done so by now. We went through the maze again, but did not take the usual turns that would direct us to the house. Instead, we seemed to plunge deeper and deeper into the heart of it, until finally it spit us out in front of the forest.

The maze was behind us now, the home at its center obscured from our vision by the rose-covered hedges. Julius made a beeline for a building in the distance, dark and almost unnoticeable against the trees. I hadn’t noticed it the first time I’d been out of their walls, and I probably wouldn’t have noticed it then if Julius hadn’t led us toward it.

As we drew closer, I realized why I had never noticed it...why probably nobody noticed it. The building was a wreck. It was just a square, concrete shack, nothing more. The windows were all boarded up, and the wood was painted with different signs and symbols, profanity and warnings to keep out. It looked like somewhere you’d go to exact torture on your victim. But I wasn’t about to turn around and look weak in front of Julius, so I fell into his pace and continued at his side as we walked around the back.

Here, Julius stopped and reached into his pocket. I half expected him to pull out a key, but he only produced a piece of folded up paper, which he set

under a rock and then turned away. I stared at the rock a moment longer, wondering what he put under there and why he'd brought me along to do it. The back of the shack had one window, un-boarded, in what must have been an attic space. It may have been my imagination, but I saw movement in it, like the shadow of something within.

I shivered and caught up to Julius in a few bounding steps as he walked further into the woods. The night had never seemed so loud as it did then, the crickets screaming and the owls howling. The wind was heavy too, beating us into unpaved terrain. I zipped my jacket the rest of the way up and stuffed my hands into the pockets, wishing I'd brought gloves.

We didn't have to walk far before little lights appeared in the distance. It was clearly our destination, and so I followed still without speaking. It wasn't until we were close enough to see that those little lights had been fire that I realized we were walking into a camp. The sound of chatter that carried to me on the wind confirmed as much. Now, I was beginning to get nervous.

"Julius..." I looked at him tentatively. "What are we doing?"

"You don't have to whisper." Julius smirked. "Come on."

My hesitation didn't bother him, if he even noticed it. By the time I caught up to him, we were on the very fringe of the campsite. I could see silhouettes of people moving around, throwing their heads back and laughing. Julius ducked, stepping under the low-hanging branches of two mossy trees, and I followed at a distance. As soon as they saw him, there was an uproar.

A girl stood and ran at him, and I expected that she would have him laid out on his back by the time I got the sense to run. She didn't hit him, though she did throw herself into him and wrap her arms around his neck. She said something, but her words were muffled.

"Julius!" Another girl squealed, getting up to greet him. I looked at them, bewildered, and then glanced around the campsite. There was one large fire in the center, and then four smaller ones clustered into each corner of the clearing. There were probably about twenty people there, and they all were looking at me.

"Come on, Iz," The second girl pulled the first one away by the sleeve. "Let him breathe."

Julius smiled. Not a smirk, not a grin, but an actual *smile*. It was perhaps more disarming than the eyes of twenty strangers weighing upon me. “I didn’t know you guys were here.” Julius said, looking between the girls.

“We just got in tonight.” Said the girl called Iz. She was positively beaming with joy. I expected it to evaporate as soon as she turned her attention to me, but she only smiled wider and then threw her arms around me too.

“It’s so great to meet you!” She said, in spite of the fact we hadn’t been introduced. Her arms were like a vise...I didn’t know whether to hug her back or attempt to shake her off, so I did neither until the other girl rescued me, pulling her away.

“I’m sorry.” The second girl said. “She doesn’t have an off switch; I’ve checked. I’m Catherine...Cat for short.” She stuck her hand out, and I looked at Julius for approval. He was laughing, so I shook it.

“Lilith.”

“Of course you are.” Said Iz. “I mean, no offense, but it’s pretty obvious.”

“You should go find Janna.” Julius suggested. “She didn’t know you were coming, did she?”

“No,” Cat grinned. “I can’t wait to see her face when she sees what Iz has done to her hair.” She moved, and without the flames behind her, I could see the marled scars on her skin...claw marks that raked the left side of her face. I almost gasped, but managed to swallow it with a cough instead.

The girls left, and a young man assumed their place, his hand at his head in salute. “Connor.” Julius nodded, and the man’s hand dropped. “Is Desmond around?”

“He’s on patrol, sir. Shall I call him in?”

“Yes.”

Connor nodded and dismissed himself. “Have a seat.” Someone suggested, and Julius nodded for me to take up a spot on a big log. I did, enjoying the heat from the fire, before looking around some more. Most everyone had gone about their business. The only one staring at me still

was a young girl, who couldn't have been more than seven. I couldn't help staring back at her, wondering why she was so intrigued by me, until she finally broke eye contact, laughing. She darted inside a tent...one of dozens of small pop up tents that were set up out here.

Julius was immersed in conversation with a couple of men who'd been happy to see him and shake his hand. The people who still milled about were ones with mugs in their hand or bowls in their lap. They ate and talked amongst themselves and laughed, watching the fire and each other, reprimanding children who got too close to the flames, and occasionally stealing glances in my direction.

A massive black wolf appeared then, trotting right up to where Julius and I sat with our small audience. Those dark eyes slid over me, and then focused on Julius. "Desmond." Julius grinned. "I have a task for you."

The wolf began to transform, right in front of my eyes. I'd never seen it happen before. It was both intriguing and horrifying to see teeth and bones retract to become something else. I watched it the way you watch the carnage of an accident. And then it was over, and the man who stood before us was tall—easily over six feet—and well-muscled. And he was stark naked.

Julius threw his hand in front of my eyes. "She's a bit prudish, is all. You know, she's new to this world."

"Ha." Desmond laughed. It was a really deep and enchanting sound. "Forgive me, princess."

When Julius removed his hand, I opened my eyes to find that he was thankfully wearing pants. Suddenly it was too hot by the fire, so I inched back and refused to meet his eyes. "What can I do for you, your highness?"

"Shove the formalities for one." Julius clapped him on the back. "I'm taking Lilith to Gehenna. I thought you may accompany."

A grin cracked Desmond's face, showing off dazzling white teeth. "You mean you need a friend to keep you out of trouble."

"One in the same." Julius shrugged. "What do you say?"

"Yes, your royal highness. I will be your chaperone."

"Call me that one more time, and I don't care how big you are, I will knock you out myself." But Julius was laughing, a sound that only grew

louder when Desmond bowed his head and said, “yes, your highness.”

It was a side to Julius I hadn’t seen, and I couldn’t be sure why. Did he not want me to believe he had a heart, or feelings? I’d thought at first that he was the bad cop to James’ good cop, but I was beginning to wonder if he wasn’t even half as bad as I believed him to be. Those girls had clearly thought fondly of him, and Desmond seemed to be an old friend. It must have just been me that he hated. And yet he had helped me.

Desmond ducked into one of the tents. It was almost comical watching him try to fold himself into that space. “Who are these people?” I asked, finally unable to bite it back any longer.

Julius gave me a sideways look. “Think of them as the King’s guard. Desmond and a few others patrol the grounds and the land around it.”

“And they sleep in tents?” I cast a glance at the flimsy material, dimpling against the wind. There were dozens of rooms in the Main home.

“They’re nomadic people...some more than others. Our doors are always open, but only a few have ever taken advantage of it. They come for meals, and the cooks are happy to accommodate them, but they prefer to sleep under the stars.”

When Desmond emerged, he was fully clothed and I was thankful. He was nice to look at, but my ears still burned from the close call a few minutes before. Besides, the shirt he wore was tight enough that it left little to the imagination.

Desmond took point, leading us away from the camp, deeper into the woods. I might have been scared...he was big enough to crush me and pass it off as a hug. But something about him was warm. There was no malice to him, as if he didn’t comprehend such a thing. Though we’d just met, he exuded safety. Which, I later realized, was exactly why Julius had brought him along.

We stuck to the wooded path while Julius and Desmond caught up, and I fell into a rhythm with them. I didn’t pay attention to their conversation, but I liked the sound of their voices...Desmond’s deep and slow and Julius’ with far less scorn than I’d imagined him capable of. I didn’t realize where we were until the conversation stopped.

Janna had brought me here the other day, on our way back from the city. It was a storm cellar, just in the middle of nowhere. The path lead

back to the werewolves' den. Of course, it more than likely went the other way too...into the city.

Desmond pulled the door open and disappeared inside. Julius turned to me with a grin. "I guess you're going to have to trust me."

I did, as it turned out. Maybe not entirely, but definitely in Desmond's company. "What's with all the tunnels, anyways?" I asked, trying not to focus on the fact that the walls seemed tighter than I remembered.

"The city is far older than most people know." Desmond explained. "The tunnels were built long before the restaurants and houses that exist now. These days they're not used much, but I imagine if you could see a map of what it looks like down here, it would blow your mind."

I didn't doubt he was correct, considering the complexity of the maze that protected their home. And that was above ground.

"So, what's a girl like you want to go to Gehenna for anyways?"

"I don't." I looked for Julius, but in the dark it was useless. "I'm not really sure where we're going."

Desmond laughed and it echoed around us. "What are you cooking up, Julius?"

"You'll see soon enough."

That turned out to be true, as it was only a few minutes later that Desmond stopped and began to climb a ladder on the wall. He moved something that made a heavy grating sound and then he was gone. Julius went next, then turned and offered me a hand. It struck me as odd, and even if it hadn't I'd not have taken it on principle.

There was a gap between the last rung and the hole I was trying to climb out of, but I managed to pull myself up. The effort left me breathless, doubled over in an alley, while Julius and Desmond snickered at my exhaustion.

The air here smelled different, salty and stale, almost like the diner. But as we emerged from the alley, I realized what it was...the sea stretched alongside us, the water rising right up to the ledge at our feet, being slapped over the bannister with the force of the wind. I pulled my sleeves further down over my hands, but couldn't deny the sense of awe that swept over me.

The water was a marvelous thing. I'd seen it in the distance the night James had taken me to the library, but this was incomparable. I didn't even care what we were doing there anymore.

We walked along the dock until Desmond found a small wooden boat tied up to one of the beams. He untethered it and Julius got in. He looked at me expectantly. "You scared?"

"No." I said automatically. But I was. I'd never been this close to the water, never breathed its scent, much less been in a boat or swam in it. The wind was causing the waves to slam the shore. I could only imagine what it would do to that little boat. I stepped in slowly, hands out for balance, and considered it a small victory that I didn't fall. I immediately plunked myself down, ignoring the smirk from Julius. Desmond handed us the oars and then got in.

I could not imagine where we were going. There was nothing on the horizon, save for some tiny lights that could have been fireflies in the distance. Surely we weren't going to paddle all the way there? Desmond set off in that direction, though, and Julius rowed behind me while I actually began to wonder where the Hell we were going.

We appeared to be rowing against the wind; it burned my face as we pushed on, Desmond steering us for a bit of marshland. As we neared it, the wind caught in the reeds. My ears had to adjust to the silence again as we came to a slow stop. I followed Julius out of the boat, and didn't deny his help when I felt the wet sand pulling at my shoes like it wanted to suck me under into a watery grave.

The marshland only surrounded the outer edge of what I realized was a small island...barely big enough to house a one story building. But the weeds and cat-lilies obscured it, so that until Julius pulled me through the wet grass, I half expected to walk straight into the water. "Welcome to Gehenna."

Desmond pushed the door open, but there was nothing inside besides a more oppressive darkness than what we left behind. Still, he led us further into the building, and as we drew deeper, I realized two things: 1—it was much bigger inside than it had appeared and 2—it was most certainly not abandoned. Noise echoed off the walls, growing closer with each step, until we reached the end of a hallway and Desmond opened that door.

The men and women inside were all too focused to look up at us. I was grateful as I watched them hurl themselves at each other, grunting and yelling, dodging and jabbing at each other. Fists and kicks were flying through the air, and the distinct smell of sweat permeated the stale room.

“There’s our guy.” Julius tipped his chin in the direction of a slender man dressed all in black who was engrossed in what looked like a staring contest with a woman in red lipstick and a shaved head. Julius grimaced and pulled up the hood of my jacket so that the shadow obscured my face. “Hang back.” He suggested.

Desmond skirted the room with me, a few feet behind Julius at all times, as he approached the man in black. Though he was not particularly tall (maybe an inch or two shorter than Julius), he was imposing. “Ace.” Julius crossed his arms, but Ace’s concentration went unbroken. “You remember me?”

Ace’s eyes flicked over towards us. They were disconcerting, a most unusual green with a sort of starburst pattern in them. He looked like he could have hypnotized us with them. He returned his attention on his opponent, but the eerie feeling didn’t disappear. I suppressed a shudder. “Yeah,” he spoke with an accent that was unlike anything I’d ever heard. It was distinctively *not* British, but that was probably the closest thing to it. “From the diner.”

But this wasn’t the man Julius had been with the day I’d run away. Though he too was a hunter, this was not the guy Julius had pinned against the wall that day.

“You worked with my sister once.”

“And you’re here because?”

“You want to look at me when I’m talking to you?”

He spared Julius a glance again. “Not really.” He looked back at the woman, who seemed annoyed by the interruption. “Your sister’s easier on the eyes.”

Finally, Julius’ patience seemed to reach its end. He grabbed a fistful of Ace’s shirt and dragged him close. Nobody looked up, but the woman yelled and called Julius a few choice words which he expertly ignored. “Now I have your undivided attention, why don’t we finish the conversation we started a few weeks ago?”

But Ace had apparently noticed my presence, because he grinned. It made his crooked nose look even more twisted. “What the Hell did you bring her here for?”

“I’m glad you asked. Let’s take this outside.”

Desmond led us out the building, Julius never releasing his grip.

I was incredibly grateful for the fresh, salty air when we emerged and the wind that slapped my face. Though nobody had bothered to glance my way, I felt entirely exposed in there.

“I’ve a feeling this is going to be a good story.” Ace looked at me. “Take your hood off.”

I looked at Julius for confirmation or permission. Either way, he gave it with a curt nod, so I shook the hood loose. Ace let out a low whistle. “You must be out of your mind, bringing her here.”

“Oh?” Desmond asked. “Why is that?”

“You know why.” Ace spat. He looked around, like he expected people to descend upon us.

“This is Lilith.” Julius explained. “Lilith, this charming young man calls himself Ace. Ace here is sort of like a hunter. I brought you here because I have a feeling he knows something he isn’t telling you.”

I shook my head, looking between them. “I don’t understand.” I didn’t know Ace, obviously. How could he have been withholding information from me when I didn’t know him?

“I’ll explain. Ace has been following you. I don’t know when he started, or why, but I’m guessing it’s not a coincidence that he was at the diner the same day you and I were.”

“I’ve never seen him before.”

“Maybe not, but he’s seen you. And I’ve caught him lurking twice now. You want to tell us why?”

Ace stroked the stubble of his chin, thoughtful. “Isn’t it obvious? I’m a hunter...she’s the prize winning buck.”

Desmond snorted in disbelief. “We’re all the prey to you. There’s something you aren’t saying.”

My eyes narrowed. I would take answers from whoever was willing to give them. "How do you know each other?"

"Ace and I go back a little while. We exist in the same social circles, so to speak. The morning at the diner he was hanging around outside...think of it as standing guard, while his friend and I had a chat inside. Two days ago, I noticed him watching you train with Delilah. He was there last night too, and probably would have been tonight except I cut our session short. So, Ace, what do you want with Lilith?"

Ace smirked. "I'm sure you'd like to know."

Julius grabbed his arm and twisted it behind his back.

"I would." I glared at him. "Are you working for Xian? Or Arich?"

"I work for no one." Ace said, trying to loose Julius' grip. "Like I said, I'm a hunter. And I'm a good enough one to know that she's not your run-of-the-mill vamp. And the fact that you're hiding her behind your silly little hedges and teaching her to fight...well, that tells me she's valuable to someone. So, I've been watching and waiting to make my move."

Julius ground his jaw together. "You'll not be making it." He pulled tighter on Ace's arm until I heard a crack. Ace howled in pain. When Julius released him, he dropped to the ground, cradling his shoulder. "Stay away from my family. Stay away from Lilith." His voice was a cold enough warning, but having just watched him snap a man's arm, it held even more venom.

Ace rocked on the ground, his sallow face twisted into agony. "I'm not just going to let it go." He warned.

"I was hoping you'd say as much." Julius grinned. "I'll be looking forward to our next encounter."

Our encounter with Ace haunted me the rest of the night and well into the next morning. I'd never seen him, but he'd managed to follow me. How long had he been doing it? Had he been there the whole time, at my father's home, watching? Or had he seen me at the diner that morning and tracked me down after? Either way, I didn't believe he was stalking me of his own accord. James and Julius had made the mistake of thinking I was valuable, too, but I didn't believe it was Ace's entire motivation for finding me here.

I'd pestered Julius and Desmond the entire way home...how had he known Ace was following? What exactly was that place? And if he was a hunter, why didn't Ace take the first opportunity to take us out?

They didn't offer much, except Desmond did graciously tell me that the place they called Gehenna was a sort of training grounds. I suggested that since Ace had been spying on me during training, that maybe he just wanted to recruit me, but Desmond and Julius had both laughed. "Trust me when I say that's not what he wanted."

I went about my usual routine, but the whole day I was anxious to get outside at night and resume my training. Julius had told me he'd take over from here on out, and it was a more exciting prospect to have him beat me to a pulp every night then to have to listen to Delilah's yells.

By nightfall, I was out of my mind with the weight of everything that fell upon me, and restless to boot. There were plenty of books around to occupy my mind, plenty of questions that I could puzzle over, but I didn't want to focus on the endless stream of unknown again. A walk in the gardens before meeting Julius seemed like the perfect distraction. After all, it was the place where just a few days before I'd let all my troubles go and forgotten to fear my enemy or question his motive. It was that desire to alleviate the pressure that had me strolling through the halls, making my way to the exit.

The halls were dark and quiet, as I was accustomed to. They filled up in the hour following dinner, so much so that navigating through the masses was an impossible task. Other than that, it was quiet around here, and I liked it that way. I wouldn't have minded spending more time with Janna, or having James actually acknowledge my existence once in a while, but other than that, the solitude was generally peaceful.

Once I reached the bottom of the stairs, though, there was a shift in the air... one that coaxed my skin into goose bumps. I was no longer alone. Three figures stood silhouetted in the entryway, directly across from me. The front door hung wide open.

Something was wrong.

My feet kept moving though my brain wanted to turn the other way. When I saw the figure in the middle I realized what was going on. The small girl that stood between two strange men stared at me in a sort of shocked terror. She looked particularly small beneath the weight of a heavy arm draped threateningly over her narrow shoulders, but I knew I'd seen her before.

I stared at the men, every bit human, trying to understand how they'd gotten past the first line of defense, much less made it through the maze. I didn't have much chance to question it because I realized suddenly why the little girl looked familiar. She was the one who had watched me in awe yesterday at the werewolves' camp. Had they taken her from there?

I took another step closer, and froze in place to the sound of a loud click.

A shaft of moonlight from the oculus glanced off the object in one man's hand, steel and small and pointed right at me. My breath caught momentarily in my chest while I eyed the gun. "What are you doing here?" I demanded. The words sounded strong to me, though I felt that I must be trembling as much as the young girl who was staring at me with wide, terrified eyes.

The man with the gun shook his head, stepping slowly forward. "If you're a good girl, then nobody will need to get hurt." He smirked. "Good girls don't ask questions."

His face was younger than his voice suggested, though dark and unshaven. He couldn't have been much older than Julius; His companion, too, seemed just slightly older than myself. I looked between them and found the courage to speak again. "What do you want?"

"Lots of things," The man answered gruffly. "And you're going to give them all to us."

"Or the girl's going to die." A second gun was pressed to the young girl's temple, and though she shook violently, she did not scream. It was in

her dark eyes, wild with terror, but only a small gasp escaped her.

All I could manage was a nod. My dry mouth couldn't have made any audible noise even if my brain had known what to say.

Clearly calling the shots, the first man stepped close enough that I could see the relish burn in his hard eyes. "She's just a child, herself." He mocked. "How old are you, anyways? Sixteen? Seventeen at the most."

"Please," I tried again, "we have nothing of value here."

But he seemed not to hear me. Instead, he turned to his companion, who I didn't recognize. He seemed to know me, though, because he nodded some sort of confirmation. "It's her."

Before I knew what was happening, the first man had seized my upper arm tightly enough to leave a bruise and pulled me toward him. From the corner of my eye I saw them release the young girl, pushing her forward so that she took off at a run without as much as a backward glance. "Don't struggle," He warned, "and maybe when we're all squared away, I'll let you walk freely."

It wasn't an enticing promise, and the fact that they didn't bother hiding their faces suggested that they did not intend for me to survive whatever was in store anyways. Shit. I'd spent the last week learning self-defense, but those old rules and standbys went right out the window now that there was a gun involved.

They appraised me together, moving closer until I was backed into the wall. The man dusted a cold finger along my collar bone. Refusing to move my eyes from him, I noticed the thick scar that cut across his cheek. A cold shock choked the air from my lungs when I finally recognized him as one of the men from the night I'd been bitten. He was the one who'd thrown me into the wall. But why was he here now?

He smiled, now that we'd been reacquainted. "Good to see you again." And then his fingers delved down to grab the medallion that hung at my neck. He wrenched it free at once. There was a tiny metallic noise as a piece of the chain broke on the floor. In its absence, I felt exposed and inexplicably vulnerable. "I'm sure that's worth a pretty penny." He said, looking down at the antique piece in his hand. The statement garnered the attention of his comrade, who looked eagerly over his shoulder on tip toes.

I assessed him with the assumption that this was the other man from the alley, but he didn't seem the least bit familiar. He grimaced and shifted uncomfortably, as though my necklace were cursed. He looked at his friend through narrowed eyes. "Is it what I think it is?"

Wide-eyed, the first man managed a nod. Seconds later, he released his grip on my arm, brushing his hand across his pants as though my skin had repulsed him. "We're done here." He said. Still, the gun was pointed at me, and yet I couldn't bring myself to feel fear when I didn't understand half of what was going on.

The second man looked at me grudgingly. Suspicion soured on his face. A long index finger stroked the trigger, almost an impulse of its own.

Standing at the other end of that human weapon, I knew how quickly it could end. All of it. It was an uncomfortable truth that in a second, a twitch of his finger could end my life. It stopped me from moving and made me feel dizzy at the same time.

They began to retreat backwards into the night, slowly and without the gun moving off of me. I closed my eyes, trying to deny the fear.

When the gun went off, it stole the breath from my chest, and I closed my eyes tighter, waiting for an impact that never came. I opened my eyes in time to see the two young men running out into the night like their lives depended on it. A strange sound escaped me, something like strangled relief, and I turned around. My ears were still ringing from the blast and the echo and the blood rushing through my ears, so I hadn't heard him, but I could see my name forming on his lips. *Lilith*. The King lay at the foot of the steps, not far from me.

His own blood leeched out around him, a rapidly growing pool of crimson.

I ran to him and dropped to my knees at his side. *Find the wound*. Those three words suddenly seemed all that I was capable of thinking. If I could find where he'd been shot, I might be able to staunch the flow. But there was so much blood...already it was soaking into his white shirt, and making it impossible to see anything. I ran my hands over his stomach, his chest, until I found it.

Still, the King was trying to speak. Sound was returning to me slowly, but I couldn't make out anything he was trying to say. "Hi..." He

swallowed, and it seemed to take a lot of effort. My hands were trembling...I think my whole body may have been trembling.

"Shh. I don't think you should be talking." I pressed harder against the spot and opened my mouth to scream for help when I heard the footfalls like thunder.

Julius didn't make it entirely down the steps before phasing, jumping as a wolf over his father. His back legs didn't even get any traction before he peeled out the door. James dropped down opposite me, checked his father's pulse with a finger on the neck and then looked up at me. "Are you hurt?"

"The King...your father..."

Suddenly the queen was there, and she took James' place across from me. James tried to pull me away, but I wasn't letting go until help came. I shook him off and managed a single word, "No."

"I'm here." Delilah announced, coming over to kneel next to me. Her hands pushed mine away, and I let James drag me back that time. She knew what she was doing.

James helped me up. I might have swayed if it weren't for his arms anchoring me. "Are you hurt?" James demanded again, tilting my face into the light as though he were inspecting for any signs of damage. He sounded calm and dignified, but when I managed to look at him, I saw that his eyes were blazing with something like anger.

"No." I blinked. The hall had filled up with people now. An older woman came in and started giving orders, directing people about. I didn't hear what she said, but the King was still trying to speak. His wife leaned her head to his lips, held his hand, and shook her head. Whatever words he was attempting to say, they weren't being heard.

"He's in good hands." James assured me, grabbing my chin so that I had to look at him. I blinked, but his words were lost on me. I was far away, reliving the day that man in the alley had thrown me against the wall like it was his God-given right. I thought of the way he had looked at me tonight, like he was intrigued and disgusted. I thought of the way he had teased that trigger...he'd wanted to shoot me. He'd gotten the King instead. But was it an accident, or just a way to get away?

Somehow, I ended up in the shower. I wasn't really sure who lead me there, but they turned the water on and laid out a towel for me. I stepped under the jet still fully clothed and let it beat the blood out of my shirt until my skin was red underneath. Then I undressed and stood under the stream 'til the water went from scalding to lukewarm. I scrubbed the blood out from under my fingernails, scoured it off of my skin, and even wringed it out of my hair.

When I emerged there were clean clothes waiting for me on the counter. I slipped into them and opened the door to find Iz standing there. "James asked me to keep you company." She explained. I nodded, and followed her through the halls until we got to a big black door. She opened it, allowing me to enter first. James was sitting on the bed expectantly.

"Your highness." Iz sounded surprised.

"I'm not of any use right now." James explained. "You can return to your camp. They need you now." Iz nodded and pursed her lips before disappearing. "Have a seat, Lilith."

I perched on the edge of the bed and James handed me a mug of something. It was steaming and felt good between my palms, and I drank it without question. "Your father?"

The door opened and Julius came in. He shook his head. I took that to mean that the intruders had gotten away.

"It's too soon to tell. But he isn't conscious to say what happened. Can you?"

I could, and so I did, explaining everything from the moment I had noticed something was amiss to the second he had knelt across from me.

"And they were just going to walk away?" James asked for the second time since I'd finished my tale. My nervous system was beginning to respond to the coffee James had retrieved for me. Though I still had no idea what had really transpired, the shock was beginning to fade away. Julius watched me, hard eyes made even harder by his suspicion.

I had hoped James or even Julius would be the one to provide me with answers, but that didn't seem likely as James looked as mystified as I felt. I decided not to answer him. "Xian must have sent them to get the

necklace. It's the only thing that makes sense. They knew exactly who and what they were looking for."

James didn't seem so sure. "And they were human?"

"Yes. I recognized that one man from that night you bit me. He was one of the two that cornered me in the alley."

James looked away, focusing on Julius instead. I wondered if the way I spoke so blatantly made him uncomfortable. "It doesn't add up. Why would a vampire get humans to do his dirty work?"

"Well, that's obvious." I frowned. "He offered them the one thing that every human seems to want—eternal life. What I want to know is how they made it through the maze?"

James frowned too, contemplating my question. "It's impossible." He said after a while, though he clearly wasn't sure of that.

"Apparently not." Julius spat. It was quiet while they considered it, and then Julius looked up, his face grim. "The only way they could have made it in is if they already knew how to get in."

"No human knows how to get through the maze." James shook his head. "There are the tunnels..."

"Which should be locked."

"Unless we have a traitor in our midst?"

Julius merely raised an eyebrow by way of response. It was possible—it had to be, if you could only make it through the maze if you'd been told exactly where to turn. I didn't know these people well enough to say whether they were capable of treachery, but it wasn't exactly a long shot to say that someone driven by hatred like Delilah would want me gone.

There was a brief knock on the door before Janna poked her head in. "Sorry to interrupt." She said, looking between the three of us with the weight of unspoken questions. "Mom's looking for you."

James stood so quickly that he was able to pierce the remnants of shock that had still clouded around me. Seeing James' dedication made me feel a little twinge of guilt for thinking so darkly of his mother.

I nodded in response to the one he gave me on the way out. He didn't say as much, but I had a feeling he would be back shortly.

Janna's eyes narrowed in suspicion towards Julius, but she waited until James was out of earshot before speaking to me. "Is it true? Did you really save Molly's life?"

"Molly?" I asked, willing my brain to catch up with the rest of the conversation.

"She's no Mother Teresa," Julius was quick to dismiss her, though I did see a glint of appreciation in his eyes that his acerbic words couldn't deny.

"Is Molly the little girl who they had captured?" I ventured a guess.

"Yeah. The one that you traded spots with. I have to say, Lilith, I didn't have you pegged for a martyr."

"I didn't trade places with her," I shook my head.

"Well, Molly is saying you did." Janna managed a weak smile. "Everybody is buzzing about the vampire savior. And you scared the intruders off, too. I knew we should keep you around for something."

"She didn't scare them off." Julius snorted. "They knew the gunshot would attract others, and they ran."

Julius didn't know that they *had* seemed scared of me, though. Or at the very least, disgusted by me.

"Well," She shook her head a little. "I'm going to head back. I want to be there when he wakes up."

In the silence left in her wake, I looked at Julius awkwardly. It wasn't my room, nor was it his. The answer of whether to wait here for James or go back to my own room was one that depended upon whether Julius was staying. But James knew where my room was, and so he could find me if he did wish to continue our conversation—whether it be the one we'd started nearly a week ago or the one that had been interrupted mere minutes ago. I was almost to the door when Julius spoke, stopping me in my tracks.

"What was my father saying to you?" His eyes were narrowed on me like they were locked around a target. I guess whatever progress we'd made in the last few days was now undone.

I bit my lip. "He said hi."

“Hi?” Everything about Julius suggested that he doubted that as truth.

I shook my head. “I didn’t understand it...I still don’t.”

“Maybe he was saying bye?”

I grimaced at the thought. “Maybe.”

James did not come back to visit me that night. Nor did I see him the next day. I stayed in my room the better part of the day, until I could take it no more. I had to get out of that room or I'd drive myself insane trying to answer questions that only seemed to mount each time an old one was answered. I considered the mythological hydra, an ugly serpent who grew two heads every time Hercules chopped one off. Life was a hydra.

The grief was still so raw that I couldn't bear to think of it, yet it was all my mind seemed to be capable of focusing upon. Since leaving the night before, I hadn't seen any of the royal family.

If I were going to leave, now was the time to do it. If I'd learned anything the night before it was that life was fleeting. When I'd thought he was going to shoot me, I had gotten a good glimpse of my rapidly vanishing life. My own mortality loomed over me like a dark cloud.

But really, what did I have to look forward to beyond these walls, anyways? Xian was a part of my past, and I would spend the rest of my life here, or even in the dungeon if that would keep me from having to see him again.

Perhaps it was odd, but I'd rather stay where I was comfortable, than go out and test the waters. What if I left, only to find myself in more trouble? Gabrielle had enticed me to run away by offering things I couldn't have at my father's home...sleeping under the stars, visiting the beach, walking through the city streets. I'd already crossed two of those off the list, and at least here I had the tentative beginnings of friendships. Even Julius didn't seem to hate me anymore.

By the time I finally left my room, it was well after dinner and I was near delirious with hunger. My feet led me to the kitchen, where the few women there seemed to be in the middle of cleaning up. They all looked up the moment I entered, and I felt their surprise for a few heartbeats before Iz came skipping over. "Lilith! You missed dinner. I'll bet you're starving. Here, sit."

I followed her to a stool that stood against the counter and planted myself upon it, while she began to spoon something from a large pot on the stove into a ceramic bowl. I watched her throw some salt atop it and then Cat came waltzing into the kitchen balancing dishes in the crooks of her

arm. She smiled as though we were old friends and dropped the dishes into the sink.

The stew was not as beautiful or elaborate as my other dinners had been, but it smelled delicious. “Thank you,” My stomach growled gratefully, a reminder that yesterday’s lunch had been cut short before it even began.

“Of course.” Iz smiled like she had a secret, but it was a warm look. In fact, it struck me as surprisingly maternal.

I ate in silence while Cat and Iz did the dishes, giggling and splashing water like school girls. My eyes flickered over everything, unashamed, taking in the large kitchen with its immaculate granite counters and gleaming appliances. The other women in the room hustled off, but Iz and Cat lingered. I didn’t care to focus on what they had to say; they were far too casual. Did they not know that their king was hurt?

I’d just set the spoon down when Iz rushed over. “Would you like some more?” When I shook my head no, she scooped the bowl up, considering me. “You’re so skinny.” She clucked. “How are you feeling?” She pressed the back of her hand to my forehead.

I ducked away from her on instinct, and then ventured a look at her sympathetic frown. Cat was watching with a small, expectant smile. “What?”

“I don’t mean to pry,” She explained, “I just thought you might like to talk.”

“About what?” It wasn’t meant to sound at all as defensive as it came out, but her eagerness to help was disarming. I’d met her not even three days ago, and already she was fawning over me. I didn’t trust it any more than I understood it.

“Anything. I know it can’t be easy, any of this.” Her voice dropped as she leaned into me. “I remember when Jocelyn went through it. She was terrified, not that she’d ever have let anyone see it.”

“Jocelyn?” I repeated dumbly. “You mean this has happened before?”

“It’s not a pleasant story.” She pressed her lips tightly together, shaking her head. “In fact, I’d rather not think much about it. But I’d be more than willing to help, in any way I can. I’ve heard of some herbs that

could ease the pain, although I suspect James is already taking care of that.”

I stared, dumbfounded, and tried to grapple with her words. From our entire exchange, I had gleaned only one thing: James had lied to me. I had (very sarcastically) asked if it was a habit of theirs to take in victims, and he had made it seem as though I had been a fluke...an accident. But there had been another. A girl named Jocelyn, and she'd been through the same thing as me. Clearly, it hadn't ended well.

Iz was still talking when I emerged from my thoughts, but it may as well have been white noise for all I heard of it. “Thank you for dinner.” I managed, despite the disgust that coiled in my stomach. Before she even had a chance to respond, I was gone.

Though I had decided again that I hated James, my heart leapt when I finally heard the knock on my door. I held my jaw tight, clenching my teeth around my anger as I waited for him to enter, but was surprised instead to see Janna let herself in. I hadn't even gotten over the whole thing with Katie and I was going to take my anger out on her, until I saw her tear streaked face and realized that she was wearing the same clothes that she'd been in when I last saw her.

"Janna?" I ventured, unable to keep the fear from seeping into my voice. I was expecting the worst, and yet a sliver of hope within me suggested that perhaps the worst had yet to come.

Her face was unnaturally pale, made even more prominent by her red-rimmed eyes. Just a look at her had my heart dropping into my stomach. "He's gone." She said on a sniffle.

A chill fell on me. Just like that, my anger was gone, replaced by a hole in my stomach.

She took a ragged breath. "It just happened." A new line of tears made its way down her cheek, gleaming silver in the iridescent light that slipped through the window. "We wanted you to hear it from us..."

I stepped aside, groping for words, and Janna allowed herself into the room. She curled into herself at the window seat without a word and looked around, as though she were remembering something she desperately missed. My vocabulary had become inaccessible, and staring at her felt invasive, so I took a seat next to her.

"I'm sorry." She looked up at me through watery, bloodshot eyes. "But I didn't know where else to go."

Her sniffles sounded an awful lot like my heart breaking. "Are you ok?" It was a stupid question—as soon as it left my mouth I wished I could take it back to save myself the embarrassment.

"We knew this was coming, Lilith." Janna's voice was strong at first, but wavered with her next words. "He was sick..."

I watched her, awkward. I'd never had to be the rock or provide emotional stability. Where I came from, I was the only one who had been cursed with emotional depth, and even then there had been nobody who could offer me any sort of comfort. I'd always just mourned in secret or internalized my pain; the role of the sympathizer was foreign to me. But I could imagine what a normal person would do, and so I sat gingerly at her side. Janna didn't as much as look up. Tentatively, I placed a hand on her shoulder. This drew her attention.

"I can't go through this again," She whispered.

"I know it's hard," I offered, even though I didn't. My own father had refused to take me back in, and although I hadn't expected any less of him, it was hard to imagine feeling this grief over my own father's death. Then again, when your father was immortal, the notion of death seemed silly to dwell on. "But you're strong. You will get through this."

"What if I don't?" She moaned, tucking her head into her shoulder, as though the energy to keep it upright had been depleted of her.

"You will. You have your family, and you will get through this together."

Janna shook her head. "My family?" A laugh escaped her, but it was not the sweet sound I anticipated from her. Instead, it was full of doubt. "I've seen what grief does to them, Lilith. I don't know if we can survive this."

"Of course you can." I said again, and this time I truly meant it. "You have each other, and that is what is important."

"You don't understand," Janna shook her head, her breath hinging on a sob. "Julius almost killed himself, and James...he just shuts down. My mother...she's in denial. I have no one."

"You have me." I tried to sound hopeful, like I could really help. *Some consolation prize.* I bit my lip, willing words of comfort to come to me, but after a few moments of silence, I said the first thing that came to mind. "I never knew my mother." My voice cracked against protesting vocal chords. Even my body knew this was something I never brought up. Why would I want to remember a woman so callous she could abandon her own child? Janna didn't need to know that part, though, which was just as well since I didn't want to admit that I'd not been good enough for her.

“Well, that’s not entirely true. I guess I did... she died when I was two. But I don’t remember her.” I felt Janna’s eyes turn on me, but I kept my gaze fixed on the ceiling. “My father killed her.”

It felt wrong to talk about this. I’d never talked about it with anybody except Xian, and all he’d managed to do was dismiss my concerns as foolish. He always hated when I tried to get him to talk about the past, or even when I mentioned it.

“It was supposedly an accident.” I continued. “I know that there’s no way I could possibly remember, but I swear sometimes I can *see* her tumbling down the steps, and the blood at the bottom. They all jumped at the smell.” I fell silent, thinking that maybe this had been an inappropriate thing to bring up. The irony of that imagery did not go unnoticed. But Janna offered up no words either, and so I kept talking. “I don’t know if he meant to do it, but even if she’d been alive, we’d never have what you do. Not every family loves each other,” I squeezed my eyes shut, fighting the shooting pains that coursed through my shoulder unannounced. I wondered if it was my heart, pining for what I’d never had, or more likely just James’ hold over me making itself remembered. “And even some of the ones that do can’t hold a candle to what you’ve got. Your family is stronger than you think. Don’t underestimate that.”

Janna was fixing me with a compassionate look, but she still had nothing to say. So I kept talking, because the silence was too raw and unbearable for me. “Before I ran away, one of my sisters came to me and told me she couldn’t take it anymore. She’d abandoned her family to come live with us and realized it was a mistake. And for reasons I still don’t understand, she wanted me to leave with her. I don’t know why, but I agreed. Somehow Xian found out and he told my father. But he left out my part in the plan and pinned it on somebody else...a man who had been with us since I was a child.” I exhaled sharply. The memory hurt. I hadn’t realized how much.

“What happened?” Janna prodded.

“Father commanded that I kill him.” I paused, hating the words, hating that my father would even expect something like that from me. “I wouldn’t do it. So Xian killed them. He literally ripped their hearts out, but even in her last moments, my sister was concerned for her family...her son. She gave me this...”

I grabbed the paper from my pocket and smoothed it. Every day I picked it up off the dresser and placed it back in my pocket, though even I didn't know why. Because it felt too important, perhaps, to leave there where anybody could see it. Because I may change my mind at any moment and decide to leave without looking back. Or maybe because it was one of two meager possessions I still had. Regardless, the page with Samuel's name on it had become something significant to me. Janna skimmed over the page, without noticing the script that had been added to it. "Robert Frost." She said. She looked to me, as though expecting some kind of answer. But I had none.

"I assume this meant something important to her." I shrugged. "I'll never know what, but she entrusted it to me, and for some reason that makes me feel better."

Janna smiled, a crooked little tip of her mouth that wasn't intended for me. "I've always liked his poetry. Did you read this?" She gestured to the page that had shrunk in size, and was covered in smudges. It had been folded up and smoothed out so many times it had become a shriveled little thing.

"Yes." I said. "But I've never been one for poetry. It seems to me like a thought broken loose and skittering in a million directions." I shrugged, because as much as the paper meant to me, the words printed thereupon it were essentially worthless. "I don't know what it's supposed to mean."

"I don't think a poet writes with the intentions of having his words analyzed. I think when you feel things on that level, you just know what it means." My confused look must have spoken volumes, because she straightened. "The very same man who wrote this poem here, also said that 'to be a poet is a condition, not a profession'. I don't think even he intended his words to be dissected. If you don't know what it means to him, you can decide what it means to you."

"Which is what?"

Janna sniffed, and I looked at her for the first time since delving into my past. Her eyes were still red, but they were dry as they skimmed over the type-faced words. "I've read these words before..." She mumbled. "But it's not what you think it is. This isn't a poem about taking the road less traveled—it's about having regrets." I nodded, like it made any sense

to me, and she looked up. “That’s the beautiful thing about poetry—it doesn’t tell you how to feel, only that you should.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Janna spent the night with me. We hadn't planned it that way, but we had a way of sharing the silence when it was necessary and filling it with idle chatter when it wasn't. She was officially the only person who knew me on such an introspective level, Xian aside. We talked for hours, confessing our souls to each other, and I forgave her for the incident with Katie. This was like having a real sister...we didn't realize how much time had slipped by until we were both sitting in the bed, exhausted, and giggling about things that weren't even funny. Janna fell asleep smiling and I let her be, taking the edge of the bed.

She was gone when I woke up, but it was still breakfast, so I made my way to the dining hall. The passages were more crowded than I'd ever seen them, so much so that it was almost impossible to squeeze through the warm bodies to get where I was going. Surprisingly, they did not all seem to be headed in for a meal...they milled about every which way, like they'd been called here but weren't certain why.

"Lilith." James picked me easily out of the crowd and headed over towards me. It was the first time I'd seen him since his father's passing. I'd expected him to look like Janna had...red eyes, puffy skin, something. But he looked only like himself...tall, dark, and handsome. And maybe a little more unshaven than usual.

"James. How are you..." I'd meant to ask how he was feeling, but it was a stupid question so I swallowed what was left of it and managed a smile. "Can we talk?"

James looked around, smiling at a few passersby. "Now? It's not really the best time."

"No." I felt silly, but I couldn't help it. "But maybe soon? I need answers."

James sighed, looking over at me. That look caught me off guard. It wasn't the same I'd come to expect from him. This look was exhausted, worn paper thin and hollow from the toll of the last few days. I would have swallowed my own request even if he hadn't implored me to. "You deserve

answers, Lilith.” He said. “And I will gladly give them to you, but please, not today. Not on the day of my father’s funeral.”

I was beginning to regret not taking my chance to run. It wouldn't have been half as bad as anything I'd endured if James hadn't informed me that I was to be at his side throughout his father's funeral—as a show of solidarity. He didn't offer any details, and I didn't ask until Janna came knocking after breakfast.

One look at the dress in her hand, and I was ready to back out, literally stepping away from her as though it carried the plague. "I don't understand why I have to be at his side all night." I grumbled when she thrust the garment at me. "I mean, no offense, but I'm not part of this..."

Janna was immaculate in a black dress that tastefully accentuated her athletic build and her hair swept into a jeweled barrette. I, on the other hand, looked like I'd been stuffed into a child's dress up clothes; the dark dress was too tight and the sleeves tapered off just below my elbows.

Janna laughed. "Oh yes you are. You are a *major* part of this. You think everyone out there came just to remember my father? They adored him, of course, but I'm sure a good forty percent of our guests came solely for James' acceptance of the crown and, subsequently, to meet you. The next couple of days you are going to understand what it's like to be the queen."

I laughed in spite of the ill feeling in my stomach.

"I'm not joking." Janna fixed me with a superior look. She seemed to be chiding my attempt at lightheartedness.

"Well, you can't be serious."

"Of course I am," she scoffed. "Mother demanded it and so it shall be done."

Now I really did feel faint. Part of me still hoped she was joking, but the look in her kohl-lined eyes told me otherwise. My mouth went dry. "Your mother demanded I pretend to be your queen?"

"Yes."

"Do I have to?" I asked wearily. "I mean, really, what's stopping me from walking away?"

"Duty." Janna thrust a pair of heeled shoes at me. "We have to maintain the facade."

“What facade?”

“I don’t expect you to understand it, Lilith, because it doesn’t even make sense to me. But the truth can sometimes be more damaging than a lie, and this is one of those times.”

“What are you saying?”

Janna moved behind me and fluffed out the hair that she’d set in curls just before. A glance in the mirror affirmed that I looked presentable enough with my makeup done by her skilled hand, but it was her reaction that I was looking for.

“I’m saying that we can’t let everyone know that James bit you by a mere accident or that you’re neither human nor vampire. We had to... stretch the truth a bit, for everybody’s benefit.”

“Stretch the truth?” I parroted. “How?”

“I’ll explain later. Right now, we have guests to greet.”

I followed Janna from my room where we’d spent the past hour preparing to make good impressions, out to the staircase where just days ago the king had been shot. The memory of that solid, mortal weapon clutched in the man’s hand and the look he’d given me before he turned the gun on the King still haunted me.

Today, the scene from the foot of the stairs was entirely different. Now, people covered the steps, chatting freely, and spilled out the open doors onto the grandiose patio below. Small candles illuminated freshly planted lilies, which lined either side of the pathway, and torches gleamed at the entrance of the maze, where a mass of people stood. Everywhere I looked, people were moving around, an indomitable sea of black. Hundreds had turned out to mourn the loss of their king. And Janna was speaking to me as though nothing was the least bit out of the ordinary. “How many guests are here?” I murmured, feeling dizzy as I scanned the lot. My hand clenched around the bannister, fingers turning white as I felt my resolve being sapped.

Unconcerned, Janna shrugged. “Mother made all the arrangements. If I had to guess I’d say upwards of three hundred. Don’t worry; there won’t be too many people tonight. This is short notice...an intimate affair, if you will.”

I nearly choked on the air. “Three hundred isn’t a lot to you?”

“Hardly. They come from all over, to show their respect and devotion. If it weren’t so last minute you wouldn’t know what to do with yourself. Regular proceedings usually would consist of a number closer to a thousand.” She shrugged.

I bit my lip. “All of a sudden three hundred doesn’t seem so bad.”

“I thought not.” She failed to conceal a smile. “Oh, there’s James.”

Janna indicated a spot before us; indeed, he was standing amidst a group of people at the mouth of the labyrinth, immersed in conversation. There were so many bodies surrounding him, I wondered if he would even notice our presence. As we made our way toward the group, however, my fears became unfounded as the little party dispersed, hurrying off in opposite directions. James looked up. And then he stared at me.

It wasn’t a charmed sort of stare or even an uncertain one. The clingy black dress hadn’t camouflaged my inability to blend in and it certainly hadn’t transformed me into something above my typical status as the mistake he was stuck with. In fact, he didn’t seem to notice that I looked different at all. He only looked at me with eyes so empty that I half thought I may have been transparent. The way the firelight of the torches danced off my ghostly skin, I probably was.

“Lilith.” He greeted me with a formal nod.

I didn’t answer, not that he noticed; A young woman whose dark hair was piled atop her head came up and stole James’ attention. I dared look at Janna, hoping that I didn’t betray even a hint of jealousy.

“Do you know all these people?”

“Most of them.” She was casual, and I came to the conclusion that these large affairs were not planned only when tragedy struck. “Just stick with me and you’ll be alright.”

I suspected my safety wasn’t the only reason she wanted me to stay with her, but considering she was my only friend here, I was willing to oblige. “Ok, tell me now. What should I know? Any trivia questions? Should I fake an accent?”

Janna laughed. “Nobody expects you to know anything. Just play it by ear.”

I frowned. “I thought I was supposed to be keeping up appearances?”

“Playing coy will fit your part perfectly.”

Confused, I simply stared at her. “I thought my part was to act like a queen?”

Janna smiled as she walked away, leaving me to wonder why she was so amused. I, for one, didn’t much enjoy speaking in circles, though it seemed to be her specialty. I hurried after her, offering a smile to a young boy who stared at me slack-jawed as we passed. “You don’t have to act as much as you may think. A lot of your illusion is going to be rooted in how you really feel. Awe-struck by this whole place, surprised by our existence, and grateful for James to have spared you.”

I weighed her face for a moment, expecting some comedic relief, but apparently she was serious. “Exactly what part of that is supposed to be true?” I hissed.

“Well, it’s a stretch.” She admitted. “But you *are* awe-struck by all of this, you have to admit. Our customs and ceremonies and the way we live. You may not *like* them, but they still are nothing compared to what you had expected. And obviously you didn’t realize we were a real foe to you, since you were surprised when you found out the truth. And James...”

“Good luck stretching that one.” My voice dripped contempt, though it didn’t all come naturally.

“You aren’t grateful yet.” She conceded. “But you will be.” Janna was confident enough in that fact that I almost might have believed her if I didn’t know any better.

“Ok, let’s recap. I’m happy your brothers attacked when I wasn’t even doing anything to provoke them. The pain was excruciating, but it’s ok...I’m grateful that he bit me because I’ve always felt like an outcast longing to roam with the wolves. What else?”

“You’re glad he bit you because if he hadn’t you would have turned into a vampire. You hate the idea of becoming one of those cold, heartless, soulless—”

“Janna!” I interjected. “I don’t understand.”

“Oh,” She looked at me guiltily. “Right. I’ve forgotten to tell you the most important thing. You are a human. One hundred percent. Or at least, you were. You were in the woods hiking with some friends, got lost, and then found by a vampire. This vampire bit you and left you to turn. James came along, but there was no way to save you other than to bite you himself to stop the transformation. He thought it was a better fate, to spend your life as a werewolf.”

“Oh, how noble.” The venom in my voice was poorly concealed.

“That’s the spirit!” Janna looked excited now that I had seemingly caught on.

“One problem, though.”

Her face fell. “Which is...?”

“This story still involves one of your brothers—James—biting a human—that’s me. Isn’t that the reason for the whole cover up? To save Julius’ ass? Now you’re just putting James on the line.”

“Of course not! How do you think any of these people would respond to the knowledge that their king had bitten a vampire and not killed her?” She paused for emphasis, but apparently that had been rhetorical because she rushed into her own answer. “They’d think him weak.”

“Maybe he *is* weak!” I couldn’t help it. The lie made me angry. “He had a chance to kill me and he chose not to take it.”

“Shh!”

Janna flashed a brilliant grin at a concerned-looking man passing nearby us. She waited until the guest was out of ear shot before speaking again. “I’m not going to debate my brother’s strength of character with you. Perhaps you think James is weak, but I guarantee you there will be a few people in our midst who are desperate to prove before a large audience that they’re not. If they find out, they will be willing to do what James could not.”

“Just point me in the right direction and I’ll spare you the stress of lying to your people.” It was a poorly conceived attempt at humor.

“You’re infuriating.” Janna shook her head, though my words didn’t seem to infuriate her in the least. In fact, she looked away coolly scanning the faces of the guests as though looking for somebody.

“I’m afraid I can’t let you sabotage yourself, Lilith. I still have plans for you.” James had joined our conversation, and judging by the slight smile on his lips, was amused by the exchange between his sister and myself.

I opened my mouth, prepared to tell him exactly how I felt about his plans, but bit my tongue when a middle-aged man approached us swiftly. He walked by me without so much as a glance, and with his eyes fixed on James, swept a gallant bow.

“Matthias,” James greeted the guest wearily. But it wasn’t just his tone of voice that sounded worn out. Even on his face I could see the exhaustion, which had been clouded by my irritation with him. In all of the lies I had almost forgotten the reason we were all gathered. On top of that, James was taking on the responsibilities of leader. I almost took him for granted, but seeing the way he looked at the stooping man with unfaltering respect, I felt less inclined to give him a hard time. “Please, that’s not necessary.” James extended a hand and pulled him from the gesture. “I’ve known you all my life.”

The man straightened up to his full, impressive height, bearing a smile on his face. He was sturdy-looking, and yet you could see by the lines on his face that he was at least twice James’ age. The silver that streaked his hair certainly gave him a wizened-yet-dignified appearance. “I’d always hoped I would live to see the day you would take the throne. I loved your father, of course, but I knew it would be you that would take on the challenges of council.” His eyes swam with some kind of misty affection. Whether that was for James or his late father I couldn’t know, but either way there was something about the man that I liked. “Oh, speaking of...” His eyes shifted to me, seeking an introduction.

“This is Lilith.” James turned to where I stood, trying to look like I belonged there. I stepped forward with an extended hand, not wanting to seem rude. The man looked at me oddly for a half moment before pulling me into a hug that crushed the air from my lungs.

After an awkward moment Matthias stepped back, appraising me with unconcealed curiosity. “The queen of tomorrow. Rumors don’t do her justice.” James laughed and I wasn’t sure if he thought that was funny or was just trying to be polite. Probably both. “I never expected this from you, James. But I’m curious to know all about this intriguing beauty of

yours.” He smiled at me, and though the gesture was nice, I felt more like the puppy in the window than a human being. He was talking about me like I wasn’t there or just didn’t understand plain English.

“I’m sure Lilith would love to share her stories with everyone at dinner.” James cast me a glance from the corner of his eye.

I smiled, just before James did something that took me by surprise. Slipping his arm around my side, he pulled me into him close enough that I caught his scent—a hint of cinnamon that blended perfectly into the autumn night. His touch sent a flutter through me, like butterflies flitting through my stomach. The moment the thought crossed my mind, I remembered the girl who’d been in my shoes before, the one who I knew nothing about because I still hadn’t had the opportunity to discuss it with James. My mood darkened a shade, but I forced a smile for Matthias. “It was nice to meet you.”

His face lit up in an expression of awe, as if I had just performed some incredible act of magic. James offered him a swift nod before turning away in search of someone else. I hurried after him, not wanting to be left to the wolves. “He wasn’t expecting that.” James said, fixing me with a bemused grin.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Without anyone to perform for, I found it hard to hide my irritation with him—particularly when I was also irritated with myself for letting it bother me in the first place.

“Well, he didn’t expect someone as beautiful as you, for one thing.”

I swallowed my surprise. “Is that... a *compliment*?”

James turned, allowing me to search his face for any indication that he meant it. Despite the stone facade, his voice was soft. “It’s fact.”

“These people...” I ventured. “Do they all know that I’m dying?” I crossed my arms, trying to ward off the feeling of sudden exposure.

It clearly took him by surprise, and seemed to be one of the last things he wanted to discuss, as he offered no answer. I realized I’d never said it to him, and certainly not so plainly. His father had been the one to tell me my life was slipping away because James was too ashamed or cowardly or disgusted to do it. I thought he was on the verge of saying something, but instead James nudged me ever so lightly and whispered in an undertone, “Put on your happy face.”

I looked up in time to see the queen sweeping toward us, her long red curls tumbling elegantly down her back. It was the first time I had seen her since her husband's death, and though she still looked beautiful, I could see the lines webbing around her delicate skin, an indication of her exhaustion. Stepping back, she observed me, her lips just a little less tight than I remembered, her green eyes lighter than the first day she had approached me. "You look stunning."

For a moment, an untouched silence lay between us. Janna seemed to be attempting to send me some kind of signal over her mother's shoulder, but whatever it was, it was going over my head. I turned to James as surreptitiously as possible, hoping his message would be a little more obvious-something more along the line of smoke stacks. All he did was smile, as if he were enjoying my discomfort. I had no doubt he was.

"Thank you." I finally answered. This was obviously a part of the game, something else designed to trick these people into believing the lives that they saw here were truly blessed, not smoke and mirrors. But it was exceedingly difficult to play it cool when the queen hated me, Julius wanted to kill me, and James and I had barely even been able to say two full sentences to each other since our meeting. To pretend that I fit perfectly into this family was like pretending that I was normal, which I, of course, was not.

The queen disappeared into the maze after kissing her children goodbye. Janna popped up at my shoulder. "Come on, Lilith, let's go take our seats for the ceremony."

We walked together through the dark paths of the maze, following the outline of the torch light every couple of feet until we emerged in a large, open area crammed with chairs.

My preoccupation with not tripping became secondary as we moved towards the front, and nearly every pair of eyes turned to trail us up the aisle. The guests were packed into rows that looked too close for comfort, craning their necks around one another in an attempt to look our way. They were looking at Janna, admiring her beauty. I told myself that they didn't even see me there and focused on the space left vacant near the front of the courtyard.

Janna led me to the very front before slipping into an empty seat next to her mother. I was grateful to be distanced from the queen—until

Julius took the seat to my other side. He looked at me mildly. I wanted to ask what his problem was, but he looked away soon enough. "I shouldn't be sitting here." I leaned into Janna just close enough to conceal the whisper. "Look at all those people standing in the back."

Janna turned to look at the crowd of people ringing around the outside of the chairs and leaning against the wall of the maze. She didn't say anything. Instead, the queen spoke, leaning around her daughter to address me. "You belong here, Lilith. It's what the king would have wanted."

A lump formed in my throat. Thankfully I didn't have to try and speak around it because James suddenly appeared before us. I took in the altar that he stood upon, which I'd previously paid no mind. It was like a stage, carved of the same concrete that composed the rest of the courtyard, bearing a table with a single vase, flanked by two thick candles. James stopped before this table and allowed himself a moment to look at it, reigning in the silence that had fallen at his entrance.

"Tonight is a night for joy and sorrow," His voice was so strong and powerful that I almost didn't believe this was the same man who'd stood before his father a week ago and professed that he'd had no choice in bringing me here. "Tonight the bitter and the sweet unite as we mourn a death, but celebrate a life." He looked down at the ground, and I feared that he would lose himself in his sorrow until I looked to Janna and realized her head was down too. A sneaky glance at Julius revealed similar circumstances. They were bowing, I realized. I followed suit, hoping they didn't notice my delay.

James began speaking again and I looked up to see that his head was still down, as if he was talking to the ground. He very well could have been, because his words made no sense to me. I wondered if my brain were merely unhinged with all of the events taking place, and then realized I understood nothing because he was speaking an entirely different language.

I listened carefully, attempting to decode the words based upon his body language and context. I knew enough of other languages to know it was not French, or Spanish, and unless James was making a highly inappropriate reference to the bathroom, then it wasn't German either.

His words may not have given me even a faint understanding of what he was speaking of, but as I listened I felt myself falling under a spell

of sorts. The words which had immediately struck me as nonsensical gibberish took on new meaning, transcending vocabulary. The inflections of his tone as he enunciated words here and there began a sort of metric that offered me peace. It was almost like maybe I did belong there... Not just there in the front seat, but there as in with James. It was absurd, but the magic of his words was beginning to convince me it wasn't.

When he finished speaking, the silence was ugly and harsh. I wished he'd keep talking. I raised my head to see goose bumps all over my arms, peeking out from under starched sleeves.

I felt fulfilled and yet I longed for him to continue. James seemed to have nothing more to say, however; He reached for the ornate vase before him and upended it. The wind caught the contents, which I realized were the King's ashes, and scattered them through the air. A shudder racked me as James set the vase back on the table upside down, then proceeded to blow out the candles.

He said nothing more, looking out at the surrounding crowd. His eyes fell on his family in single succession. I looked down the row and saw the queen with her head still down and Janna with tears streaming down her cheeks, glinting silver in the passing light of the moon. My chest swelled with some kind of natural desire to comfort her, but upon feeling James' eyes on me, I turned back to him.

It may have been a trick of the light, but I almost thought he smiled at me...a small, comforting sort of tip on his soft lips. Turning back to Janna, I pushed that thought away. Janna laughed. "You're crying?" She informed me, as much a question as it was a statement.

That was what I had intended to say to her, but I put my fingers to my face and brushed away tears. I hadn't realized they'd fallen, and hopefully neither had James.

"That was it?" My voice trended towards disappointment.

"Of the ceremony." Janna nodded. "I meant to translate for you, but..." She sighed, letting the thought go. "I'm sure you didn't understand any of that."

"No," I agreed, looking over her shoulder to recall James standing there, the words drifting like snow flurries off his tongue, blanketing me in

peace. “But I didn’t need to. It was...” I groped for words to do the speech some fraction of justice, “It was hauntingly breathtaking.”

Janna smiled her agreement and stood, her eyes fixed on someone behind me. Following her cue, I stood up as well and turned to see James. He said something to his mother still in that silvery foreign language and then turned to Janna. There was such a familial intimacy between them that I felt like my very presence was an intrusion.

James must not have felt the same way, though, because his gentle voice called me out of my thoughts. The warmth of his hand resting upon my shoulder matched the warmth in his eyes, as though he could sense the shift within me. My walls had begun to crumble just the slightest bit, but James seemed to sense that. I wanted to let him know how beautiful his speech had been, but suddenly the entire English dictionary seemed inadequate so I found myself watching him, wordlessly.

James leaned into me, and I felt my breath hitch as his sent chills down my neck. “Are you ready for this?” With his lips so close to my ear, we surely looked like the lovers we meant to portray, and I looked up at him with eyes full of unspoken question. “We’re going to be under a lot of scrutiny tonight. You, especially, seem to have piqued the interest of our guests. Can you handle it?”

I flashed a smile and moved closer to him, so that no one could hear when I said, “You almost make it sound like I have a choice.” He smiled, offering up a genuine reward for my wit.

I had never been to a funeral before, but my idea of them must have been a misconception. There were no pictures all around, no weeping women clutching a box of Kleenex, and thankfully no depressing music. Following James’ speech, the tempo of the gathering jumped up from solemn to lighthearted as the guests clustered into groups and broke into conversation. Nobody cried after that. Instead, they laughed. And danced. And drank.

As it turned out Delilah had an incredible voice. It was melodic and sweet, the polar opposite of herself. She sang words that, to my untrained ear made no sense and harmonies that I didn’t recognize. They were beautiful anyways. Everyone danced and moved in time with her, moving more quickly and fluidly each time Delilah finished a glass of wine.

The confusion was overwhelming, so stark in contrast to what I had anticipated, that I was more or less lost in a swirl of action all throughout the night. I shadowed James, moving when he did, laughing with him, and looking at him for direction in the moments in between. We answered question after question about everything from how we'd met, how remarkably I was adjusting, and even a few of a political nature. James was always quick to remind the guests that they would have all of tomorrow to learn of the plans he had in store. Whenever anybody spoke they did so in English, but they made it known that their queries were intended for James. Every once in a while, somebody would get too comfortable with the exchange and look to me to start answering questions, tired of James' explanations. So occasionally I would chime in, attempting to rescue some of my dignity. I would give the same answers as James, usually truncated for brevity, and smile a lot. When they shot questions at me rapid-fire, one after another, James—coming to the rescue—would assure them that we had to go speak with someone else, but that we'd be more than happy to share stories at dinner. The night went like that, over and over again until Janna showed up after what felt like ages, but was invariably only a couple of hours.

“I’ve come to whisk you away,” she whispered, placing a light hand on my arm to steer me the opposite direction before James could realize I was gone.

“Thank God.” I muttered once we were free from the group of middle-aged men who had been either avidly listening to James talk about his plan for the vampire relocation or intently watching me like something amazing would happen.

“No, thank Janna.” She corrected, flipping a sheet of dark hair over her shoulder. She handed me an intricate, gold-rimmed goblet from a nearby table and grabbed one for herself. “Toast with me.”

“What’s in it?” I asked nervously, peering down into the chalice. The dark pewter of the glass made it hard to see the color of the liquid within it. The fact that Janna had just picked them up from the table was disconcerting to me, as most discarded glasses at my father’s home were laced with blood and other drugs. Janna seemed not to share the same concern.

“Champagne,” she said, as though it were fairly obvious.

The grapey smell was pretty telling, now that she said so. Though I was accustomed to harder liquor than that, when I took a tentative sip, it burned my mouth. “This is disgusting,” I placed my goblet down upon the table again and looked up to see Janna giggling. Her cheeks were flushed, and I didn’t doubt that this wasn’t her first taste of champagne that night.

“Not if you keep drinking it.” She giggled. “I do have to say, you’re doing very well at this whole pretend thing.”

“What do you mean?”

“I almost believe you two are actually star-crossed lovers. The doe eyes are particularly convincing.”

I laughed, but whether it was because I was glad I was capable of spinning a convincing picture or because Janna was just naive enough to hope it was actually true, I didn’t know. “I hate to force you back to reality, but you must be deranged if you’re actually falling for our charade. How much have you had to drink?”

“Not enough.” A devilish grin tipped her lips. “I hope you’re hungry.”

“Famished,” I told her honestly.

“Good.” Janna smirked. “Mother has ordered a feast to put all others to shame. Tonight we indulge in sin...*gluttony*.” Her voice carried an ominous tone, as though gluttony were unforgiveable, an offense that bore the same weight as murder.

“Well, seeing as how I’m on the highway to hell anyways, I may as well enjoy dinner.”

“You’re going to Hell?” Janna arched an eyebrow. It was a delicate gesture, but she seemed on the verge of laughter.

“Yeah, seeing as I’m bound to it and all.”

“You’re bound to Hell?” Janna leaned into me, realizing she’d spoken a little louder than she’d wanted. Apparently this was news to her. She cracked a grin. “Are you referring to my brother?”

I rolled my eyes. “You know—the whole vampire thing.” I whispered ‘vampire’ like it was a dirty word. “When I die in 14 days, I’m going to join with my long lost Father Lucifer in the fiery pit below your feet.”

“You’re so cryptic, Lilith.” Janna shook her head. I shrugged and took a large sip of champagne. I wasn’t fond of the taste, but I liked the way it sent fire chasing through my limbs, as though it had the power to control my extremities.

“I’m honest.” I objected.

Janna made a noncommittal noise and, looking like she was fighting off the urge to smile, asked, “What makes you so sure you’re going to go to Hell? I think you’ve overlooked one tiny detail.”

I waited for her to go on, but when it was apparent that Janna would say nothing more without being prompted, I decided I would just have to draw the answers from her. “Which is...?”

“You aren’t a vampire.” She said it simply and the corner of her mouth twitched, threatening a smile, even despite her wary voice. “You are a hybrid...a mix. Blood still courses through your veins. I know you think that the devil has some kind of claim over you, but you are half His.”

Silence flickered between us like candlelight while I considered the gravity of her words. “That’s ridiculous.” I dismissed her after a few moments, attempting to sweep that notion under the rug. But even as I said that, I didn’t believe it was all that ridiculous at all.

“You’re neither good nor evil. The Creator and The Devil both have claims over you. In the end, you choose where you’ll go. Not James, not Lucifer, not even God. Just you.”

“Janna, has anyone ever told you that you are—”

“Brilliant?” She flashed a toothy smile.

“Insane is the word I had in mind.”

“I second that notion.” A new voice broke the veil of our conversation. I turned towards James with a smile, and saw that he had a similar gesture on his face. I couldn’t help but wonder how he kept finding us in that mess of people, but the answer to that one was as obvious as I was. “Sorry to interrupt the philosophy lesson,” James teased. “I figured it would be best if we walked in together. You know,” He mumbled, “For appearance’s sake.”

“That’s ok,” Janna said with a quick grin. “We were done talking anyhow.”

“We were not!” I objected. “I still had questions for you.”

“I’m sure James can answer them.” Janna said, looking at her brother from the corner of his eye. “You know, later.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

James glared murder at Janna, who shrugged. “Well, with all the guests who came in from out of town, we had to make room for them to stay. We sacrificed your room, so you’ll be sleeping with James tonight.” I gaped at her, trying to justify the words. She laughed. “Just sleep.” She threw her hands up in a show of surrender. “Unless you want to do something more, in which case I promise not to judge.”

“Janna.” James warned.

“What?” She grinned.

“I-” But I didn’t complete the thought, not wanting to draw any unnecessary attention our way. We had reached the door of the house and people were dotted all over, watching us and undoubtedly listening for any hint of gossip. I swallowed back my objections and followed them into the opulent old home, my eyes taking in all of the shadows on the walls around us.

The marbled entrance hall was littered with people standing in clusters, carrying on private conversations. As James and I passed the little groups, they stopped talking and turned to watch us expectantly. James kept his eyes fixed on the doors to the grand hall, which were thrown open in a welcoming gesture. I sneaked a look at Janna, who nodded her head forward, silently guiding me along.

The grand hall was nothing like it had been the day I had been brought here to determine where my fate lay. That day the room had been empty; the king and his council and his family (minus James and Julius) had all sat at the front of the room in their fancily carved chairs, watching me warily as though they thought I might all of a sudden make a break for the door. That day the room had echoed with the king’s deep, soothing voice. Now the room was so stuffed with tables and people that an echo was impossible. The tables covered every square inch of floor available, and in turn, every square inch of the tables was covered with food.

It was clearly standing room only, as there were no chairs set up. As more people began to filter into the room, my anxiety mounted, and I held

tighter to James before I really considered the action. I didn't have a chance to speak to him, though, because within a matter of moments a small party came up and immersed him in conversation. Julius soon entered and joined us.

The queen entered when the room had filled up, her head held high and her vibrant hair stacked higher. She joined our group, and I stood a little straighter.

When I thought the room could hold no one else, James stepped apart from the crowd, and no one followed. He spoke a few short, eloquent words that made no sense to me, and then lifted to his lips a goblet that had somehow found its way into his hand. He drank, and the entire room followed suit. The solemn atmosphere lifted with an explosion of chatter, and people began to turn toward the tables set against the walls, helping themselves to the variety of appetizers.

I suffered through the night in similar fashion, following the conversations gracefully, smiling when it seemed necessary and looking out into the crowd when the chatter drew to a temporary halt. I drank when it was expected of me, and looked to James and Janna as my life preservers, following their cues.

I'd be lying if I said I remembered any of the things we discussed, or even that I cared. All I knew was that the way James was smiling at me, I had to be doing something right.

I followed James back to his room, half afraid that my red face could catch the building on fire. If he was embarrassed, he didn't let on. In fact, he seemed very nonchalant about letting me into his room. "I've got the floor." He said, nodding at a pile of blankets on the ground a few feet from the bed.

I'd been here the other day, but hadn't bothered to look around. Now I wanted to look anywhere but at James. The room set up was similar to mine, though it felt bigger. It was much like Julius' in the sparing decorations and the minimalist grey sheets. The walls were a navy sort of color that didn't look too dark considering the white furniture.

"Janna said she put out clothes on the bed," James said, unbuttoning the black shirt he wore. He faced the wall, but even from behind, he had a really good-looking physique. I tore my eyes from him and looked for the clothes that Janna claimed to have set out, but there was nothing other than the crisp and neatly made bed. I wondered whether someone came in and did that for him...mine was certainly never made.

When James turned back around, I swallowed. This was too much too soon. "Nothing?" He asked, looking at the dress that I still wore. I shook my head slowly.

"Well, if you want, I can go grab something from her? Or, I could offer you a shirt and sweatpants?"

A shirt and sweatpants. Sloppy, big, and zero sex appeal. "That's fine." I smiled. James rummaged through his dresser, pulled out a stack of clothing, and handed them to me. "I'll be in the hall. Just yell when it's safe to come back in."

I shimmied out of the dress as soon as the door was closed, grateful for the loose shirt. I had to knot the pants at the waist to keep them in place, but at least they were comfortable. I opened the door to find James sitting with his back against the wall. "I'm decent." I said, and then cringed because that was an awfully outdated way of saying that I was covered. James stood up and turned, and then he laughed.

"What?" I looked down at myself and crossed my arms.

"I guess I wasn't thinking about the size difference." He shook his head and looked at the ground, where the extra fabric pooled at my feet.

“You could trip over those.”

I shrugged. “Luckily, I don’t sleepwalk.”

His bed was even more comfortable than mine. It was bigger, for one thing, and the sheets were softer. I pulled them up to my shoulders and rolled on my side, facing away from his makeshift cot on the floor.

Sleep didn’t come easily. I kept feeling guilty for casting him out of his bed, and I kept seeing him every time I closed my eyes. It was odd, knowing that he was so close, and yet there may as well have been a million miles between us. We feigned a relationship. We were connected by an otherworldly bond. We were matched. But we couldn’t hold a conversation without his guilt or my anger getting in the way.

I stared at the ceiling for a long time before finally finding my voice. “James?”

But he must have been fast asleep, because he didn’t make any noise to indicate he’d heard me. I rolled over, burying my face in the cool pillows. They smelled like him, which was a really pleasant smell, but not conducive to getting him out of my mind.

I fell asleep hours later, practically encompassed by him.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

James was gone when I woke up, but Janna greeted me within minutes of my eyes fluttering open. She smirked a lot and asked how I'd slept and winked as if she were in on a secret that I wasn't. After a torturous hour of her poking and prodding me with different makeup utensils and styling tools, we went down for breakfast.

James met us there with his eerily-keen ability to search us out, which was quite remarkable considering the hall was crammed. If it was possible, there were more people present now than there had been for the funeral. They lined either side of the doors, a sea of faces wearing an array of expressions. There was awe, and eagerness, and surprise, and...Unmistakable envy. The werewolves may have been creatures of the Lord or whatever they thought they were, but they were not above sin. The throne was definitely coveted, even in their world. A divine set of morals did not put them above the desire for power, and it was clear on some of their faces. I suspected a few jealous glares from girls were intended for me, but the knowledge didn't make me as angry as it previously had when it had come from Delilah.

Today, the chairs had reappeared, crammed side by side along the long tables. There were only two at the front that were removed from the rest, elaborate enough to be thrones. I made to follow Janna into the crowd, but James turned to me gently and clasped my hand, leading me to the front of the room with him. The second chair was undeniably mine, and I sat in it gingerly, hoping my cheeks were not as red as they felt. I was sure to keep my spine straight, looking prim and proper...or at least, I hoped. I did not miss the queen's cool eyes sliding over me from where she stood idly listening to a rambling young man.

James did not sit, which made me feel like I'd been in the wrong for doing so, but his position before the crowd elicited a sort of awed silence. He held onto it for a few moments, then spoke with such a steady confidence it almost gave me chills again. "Today marks the day that I give myself to you, to my brothers and sisters, to the humans, to the Creator. Today I swear before you all my unwavering attention, my dedication. I

promise here and now to protect you from our enemies, to protect the innocent at all costs. Our lives exist because the humans exist, and I will not see them harmed by the devil's brood. Today marks the day that our world changes. I swear eternal devotion on your behalf, on the human's behalf, and on the Creator's behalf. No cost is too great in regards to their lives, and as such my oath today is to protect you with my life, my sanity, and my blood, so that you may in turn continue to protect them with yours."

He was a powerful speaker, and so the words did not come across weird at all. Otherwise, he might have been precariously close to sounding like a political office campaign...which, I supposed this kind of was. Still, it didn't seem like an empty-promises speech aimed at giving his people a sense of false security. James swore a promise to them, and the truth of his words was evident in the strength and quality of his voice.

James was silent a moment and I wondered whether he'd lost his train of thought. Apparently not, though, because the crowd erupted with a chorus of cheers and 'yeahs' and whistles. A few seconds passed and then James stepped down into the crowd to be swallowed whole by them all.

Janna managed to find her way to me. "That's it?" I asked her. Thankfully, my voice only held a small note of disappointment.

"There's more." She assured me. "But from here on out it's just like yesterday. You stand around looking pretty while James goes around shaking hands and kissing babies. Then we eat."

"That is...anticlimactic. And possibly sexist."

"You wanted something more eventful?" She guessed.

"I don't know. After the funeral yesterday, I was kind of expecting something...big."

"Well, no promises but I'm thinking something big will happen, alright." I questioned her with a simple look. "Yesterday was about my father." She explained. "Out of respect to him, everybody held back. But today...well, it's a bit of a no-holds barred thing, really."

Despite Janna's grim prediction, the day swept by in a blur, for which I was grateful. Mostly, I stood around awkwardly, pulling discreetly on the hem of my skirt as if it would magically grow, while people talked to James. On occasion somebody would stop to talk to me, and Janna would fade into the crowd, taking with her all of my knowledge about religion and

politics, leaving me with a smile that was as fake as the stories I told the few people who bothered asking me questions.

It was not until lunch that anything of note happened, when a man took the briefest lapse in conversation to pounce upon James.

“So, let’s hear the plan.” He said obtusely. His dark eyes gleamed with mischief. After a moment, I recognized him as Olias, the man Janna had pointed out just a few nights ago.

“Which one?” James only missed a beat. His mouth hinted at a smile for the effect of the guests, but I noticed his spine straighten in tension.

“For the vampires. Surely you have something up your sleeve. Look at what they did to her.” His eyes settled slowly on me, daring me to speak, and though I’d never said ten words to him, I decided I didn’t much like him. “They attacked a human. You of all people will make them pay, James, if only because of what they’ve done to your family.”

“I’d have never met Lilith under other circumstances.” James said, tight-lipped.

“Oh, you can’t believe that. You’re a man of faith, with some belief in destiny.”

“What will be, will be.” James agreed. “But I hate to imagine that I’d never met her, and I fear that without their intervention, she’d not be sitting here today.”

“So you’d condone their violence?” Olias looked as though he’d struck gold. He was trying hard not to smile, but he was no actor. “It’s okay if they attack a human, as long as it makes you happy?”

“I know it’s probably hard for you to believe,” I said quietly, trying to keep my voice level. “But I am happy. This is a better life than what I had before.”

Olias fixed me with a would-be sympathetic look. “Right. It really must have been hard for you. All those years you were with the vampires...”

The room had gone quiet as a crypt. Nobody spoke and not even the sound of the dishes clanking together could be heard. Time had all but frozen at this chance for gossip.

“What are you talking about?” Janna asked with an airy laugh.

“Her neck.” Olias said simply, his eyes showing her the way to the proof that would back up his claim. I shrugged a shoulder, discreetly allowing my hair to cascade over my chest. It expertly concealed the spots his eyes were looking for. “She doesn’t have just *one* scar. She wasn’t bitten *one* time. There are many.”

“I’m sorry,” My voice was cold, and I imagined the small smile I put on reflected that. “But this isn’t a subject for the dinner table.”

“Afterwards, then?” Olias smiled.

I squeezed my glass so hard I was sure it would break, but was spared the need to answer because Julius intervened. “Grisly stories of pain and torture might appeal to you, but not everybody wants to recount them.”

“Of course,” Olias nodded his head, his fathomless eyes assessing the eldest brother. “I didn’t mean to upset you. How callous of me, to bring to mind those *memories*.”

“Yes,” Julius said through gritted teeth. “Callous.”

“I merely wanted to hear Lilith’s brave battle recounted.” I’d basically just met him, but already I could tell that Olias was like a dog with a bone when it came to outing me. What I didn’t understand was why?

“Shut up.” Julius warned, his body rigid.

“I’m sorry.” He raised a hand, like he was swearing on his good name in court. “I’ve forgotten my manners.”

“Apparently you’re not the only one.” Trilled Delilah, who sat next to Olias, her beady eyes transfixed on Julius.

“Let’s talk about something happier.” Janna suggested.

Olias didn’t miss a beat. “Certainly. So, what are your intentions? Do you wish for a continued state of peaceful coexistence with the vampires?”

I looked down at my plate, gathering myself before I lost my patience with him. I waited for James’ response, but when it didn’t come I ventured a glance up to see that all eyes were on me. Olias said my name, prompting an answer.

“I do not believe in war.” I said slowly, making sure that he really had meant the question for me. It gave me a moment to deliberate the rest

of my answer. Things right now were as peaceful as I imagined they'd ever be, but neither party was content with that.

“Even after all their injustices? You know what they’re capable of.”

“Awful things,” I nodded. “But they do not require war.”

“Don’t they?” Olias looked stricken. “You don’t want revenge for what they did to you? That’s hardly human.” I watched his finger swirl absently around the top of his glass. “I know that there is more to your story than you’ve told. You have a past with the vampires, and maybe that has made you blind to their faults. Or are you a fool who would stick to your vices, no matter what they do to you?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “You would be tortured to the edge of insanity and still believe that they have a rightful place in the world?”

“Perhaps I am a fool.” I was stubborn. That much was true. “I do not believe that they belong here. However, I can only see that a war would be entirely too devastating to the werewolves, the vampires, *and* the humans. I can’t see where it would be worth the risk.”

“Let me tell you where it’s worth the risk.” He said, as if I truly cared. “Every human life has value, where theirs do not. The humans outnumber them, and us for now, but all it would take is for one of them to go on a rampage. Already they are worse than ever before. You are not the only person to have been bitten and left for dead, Lilith. The first human, yes, if you really are a human after all. But make no mistake that this has happened before. The king’s own sister was attacked by vampires. They bit her and left her for dead—”

I didn’t hear how that sentence was going to conclude because Julius stood up in a violent flash and threw his chair across the room, demanding silence. Once he’d had it, he only stalked out the door, furious. His mother looked to be on the verge of tears, and she ran after him, her long dress sweeping against the cold floor. Janna’s mouth formed a tight line. Next to me, James looked capable of murder. But I wasn’t deceived. I could see the sorrow there.

I took advantage of the pause. “Disregard the injustices they are capable of and look at this as a matter of survival. If we choose to wage war against them, we face a definite disadvantage. We cannot go out and create an army of werewolves to fight for us, as our moral codes are of a

higher caliber. The vampires can go out easily and create others, make more and more and more until even the greatest amount of power would fall under their numbers. And with our race obliterated, the humans would follow close behind.”

Olias was grinning, and I wanted to jump up and at least throw a punch at him. But I held myself perfectly in place, my head still high, and commanded every muscle in my body to stay at rest. I saw Delilah place a hand atop his, quelling whatever retort he had, and the rest of dinner followed in a sort of stilted silence.

Janna disappeared the moment the dishes had been cleared, and though I longed to follow, I stayed at James' side, scared of what he might do if left alone with Olias. He still hadn't lost the dangerous glint in his eyes, and it gleamed ominously as the hall cleared. I wasn't sure what he was waiting for, but we sat still. I had plenty to think about, and my mind kept turning to Olias' story. The king's sister. Had he meant James' sister? It didn't seem to be. Julius had appeared more bothered by the whole exchange than Janna had. Perhaps the woman Olias had intimated had been James' aunt, the sister of the previous king. It made more sense than the alternative.

An older woman came up and offered James a glass which he took with a curt 'thank you'. I accepted a glass of champagne and drank it slowly. The room emptied at a glacial pace, with some of the guests seemingly reluctant to leave. James refused a refill of his drink, which I was certain had some alcoholic content, and I nervously sipped from my goblet until my lips went numb.

At last, the room cleared...all except for me and James, Olias and Delilah. They stood together talking, but they were throwing glances at us, daring James to come over. And that's exactly what he did. I followed him across the room, nervous, and assessed them. "Your highness," Olias greeted, still wearing that infuriating smile of his. Delilah smiled also, but it was a cruel twist of her glossy pink lips.

"Leave here, and never come back." James said. It was short and simple and caught me by surprise. I had expected a verbal assault of some sort. Judging by the rage I'd seen pent up in his eyes, he'd intended to hurt him.

“Not very hospitable,” Olias’ mouth turned now to a frown, but it was entirely for effect.

“You’ve worn out your welcome.”

“How so? By speaking the truth? Or was it the political questions? Were you not prepared to answer those?” He grinned and took a sip of his drink, all without moving his eyes from James’.

“Go.”

I was beginning to suspect that James’ answers were short only to prevent him from losing control.

“Or was it the story I was about to tell? You know, Lilith never did get to hear how it ended.” His eyes flicked to me. “She was on her way back from business in the city when he attacked her. She smelled him, of course, but he was quick and smart. He chased her down, tripped her up, and bit her as a distraction. Others smelled the blood, and they came too. And when they were done with her, they left her. When she had been gone for so long, the others began to get worried, and so they went out to look for her. I found her. Do you know what it’s like to see the one you love, reduced to less than a person by the cruel intentions of another?” He shook his head, answering for me.

“A week passed and she was okay, back to her strong, esteemed self. She refused to seek vengeance, and refused to let anybody else seek it on her behalf. She was very much herself for the weeks following, and we were just beginning to accept life was going to go back to normal when she got sick just before the full moon. She was hot and cold, shaking. She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t move. Her skin was pale and her eyes were dull. We don’t get sick, Lilith.” He paused for just a second and his eyes locked onto mine. “She died the night after, when the moon hung in the sky.”

I was cold, disgusted with the story he was telling me. But I had the feeling I was missing something. James’ rage had started to fade, subdued by sorrow. A few tears shone in Delilah’s eyes. I looked back to Olias.

“When the full moon came, her body began to turn. See, we have no control over that night. Other times we choose when we turn, but without fail on the night of the full moon, we *all* transform. And as she did, her body turned against her. The genes of the vampires had spread enough. They were trying to take over. It was like watching a person go crazy, and

try to kill herself. She ripped at her hair, screamed in agony, clawed at anything she could get her hands on. Her mind was gone, eaten away by the disease of the vampires you wish to protect. But just before she died, she seemed to have a moment of clarity. She ran to the kitchens, grabbed the largest knife she could find, and plunged it straight through her heart.”

It was so quiet I could hear James’ ragged breathing next to me. The champagne curdled in my stomach. I was uncertain how much of the story was truthfully represented and how much was just the brutal truth, but it was all awful.

“Do you know what it feels like to be split in half?” Olias mused. “That’s what happened to her. Her body was splitting right down the middle, the two sides of her fighting to get free. She wasn’t the only one who died that night. Me and Julius... She took us with her.”

I was confused, but I didn’t have to say as much. My heart was hammering, and I didn’t doubt that everyone could hear it in the moment of silence. “Let me ask you again.” He said. “Do you know what it feels like to be ripped in half?” He was just inches from me now, having closed the gap so that he could probably feel my heartbeat falter.

I couldn’t breathe, much less speak, and so I only shook my head no. A cold smile crossed his face, but it was not happy or humorous. More like...pitiful. “You’ll find out soon enough.”

I shut the door behind me and watched as James paced the room a couple of times. He was pale and had looked to be on the verge of a breakdown, so I'd taken control and led him to the privacy of his own room. My plan had been to get him away from Olias as soon as possible. Now that the mission was accomplished, I wanted to demand answers, but I was still cold all over with the information I'd just received, and James didn't seem like he'd respond to any questions I asked, much less any that I demanded. The bed beckoned to me, but I leaned against the door, barring James' exit and watched him walk the length of the room before turning around and starting again. After a whole minute had passed, he finally stopped. His sorrow had transformed back into rage, and it seared in his eyes.

"That bastard!" James said through gritted teeth, his fist clenched at his side. "He just had to show up here. He had to tell you that!" James turned and kicked the wall. I made a conscious effort not to draw back against the door any further.

"I'm sorry," I offered, not sure if that was the right thing to say.

"You're sorry?" He laughed and polished the effect with a roll of his eyes. "You can't apologize for him. You don't get to do that."

"I—" I shut my mouth before anything else could come out. I had been about to say 'sorry' again. Apparently when my brain was on autopilot, it resorted to apologizing. I realized my mistake before I made it, and hopefully prevented another outlash.

"Don't, ok? Just stop."

I held my hands up in a show of surrender and edged away from the door to sit on the bed. He sighed before coming to sit next to me. I didn't look at him for fear of scaring him off. "I guess you'd like some answers now." They were the words I'd been so desperately looking for since we'd met, but now I wasn't so certain I wanted them.

"Whenever you're ready." I chanced a look at him and saw the vestiges of anger disappearing. He looked like he'd aged since this morning.

"You've been staying in her room. Jocelyn." I blinked. *Jocelyn*. The girl in the picture with Julius. The girl who'd been through the same

thing as me, the one who I'd been too scared to ask James about. "She was four minutes older than Julius, and she never let him forget it. But they were best friends. I guess that only came from the territory...it was weird, though. Like they were the same person sometimes. Obviously they weren't; they were very different too, for all their similarities. Julius never wanted me around and Jocelyn took every chance to let me tag along. He was short tempered...still is...and she was so damn patient it was infuriating." He smiled and bit his lip. I didn't doubt that the memories were painful to think of, never mind discussing them with me.

"I always felt kind of like an outsider, being three years younger. But I got to have more fun than them. Jocelyn was eldest and so she was going to be queen. Julius was groomed into perfection as the eldest son. You know, growing up you don't really think about when you're going to die." There was no need to point out that I had spent many hours fretting over it, and so I only continued to listen. "We just went through the motions, did our jobs. We knew she would be queen one day, but we weren't worried about it. Father was in good health and she had no problem finding a suitor. Olias had been her friend since his family relocated here when they were barely teenagers. They were inseparable, and they were good together. They were already matched and marked. Our job is never done, though, and Jocelyn had gotten wind of a massive trafficking. The problem was already resolved when she went out, and she only had to help deal with the aftermath, tying up loose ends. We never thought anything of her leaving on her own. She'd always been more than capable of taking care of herself, and all of us."

He paused and drew a ragged breath, trying to absorb from it some sense of courage to keep going. "She was gone a couple hours too long, and when Olias got back from his mission he decided we should look for her. So we did. And he found her. At first he thought her dead, but she was only unconscious. He refused to leave her side, and when she woke up she remembered everything. Everyone acted the way you'd expect. Olias, my father, and Julius all hoped for bloodshed. I wanted nothing but to never hear mention of the vampires again. I wanted them gone at any cost...I still do. And Jocelyn just said to let it go. She was back to herself almost immediately, giving orders and talking to us like normal. None of us had any idea what was coming, except maybe her. She was so clever. And that night, the full moon...she was so calm, like she'd expected it all along.

Seeing her like that..." His voice broke off and we sat in the quiet room together for a moment. I didn't need to hear anything else. James looked up at me after a few moments, his eyes boring into mine. "You reminded my dad of her. It's why my mother pretends she hates you so much. She can't stand the thought of you replacing her."

I didn't say anything, but a chill scurried up my spine and flushed down my arms. "And Janna." I realized now how we'd fallen so easily into a pattern.

"She lost her best friend that night. She was so...empty for so long, and then you came along."

I couldn't break away from his gaze; the depth and sorrow in his eyes were astounding, but there was something more there. Perhaps misplaced admiration? Maybe that was a stretch, but whatever it was rendered me incapable of looking away. "And you?"

"I don't see it." He said honestly, narrowing his eyes in thought.

"Good." I whispered. "I'm sure your sister was great, but I'm glad I don't make you think of her."

"Why?"

I answered honestly before it even occurred to me to lie. "I don't want to hurt you like that. When I'm gone, I don't want you to have to relive that all over again."

James considered my answer a moment and then stood up. "I'm sorry."

That caught me off guard. "Sorry?" I repeated, as though I'd never heard of such a word.

"For Olias. I'm sorry he told you that."

"I'm not."

James didn't have to say that he thought that was crazy. "He had no right to tell you about that night. He knows, Lilith. I don't know how, but he knows about you, and he is determined to make you suffer for it."

I shrugged.

"That's it?" James prompted, eyeing me.

“I’m not surprised. How could he not want to make me suffer the way she did? Or the way he did, or your brother? Your whole family suffered, died a little because of what the vampires did to you. It’s only natural he would want retribution. That’s what love is.”

“No.” James denied. “Love isn’t about vengeance. It’s about trust. Jocelyn wouldn’t want anybody to suffer for her, and Olias should know that.”

“People lose their ability to think rationally in love. They’ll do whatever they feel like they have to, whatever the other tells them to, no matter how ridiculous. She may not want bloodshed, but if that’s what Olias needs to feel whole again, we can’t deny that to him.”

“Like Hell we can’t.” James snorted. “Why are you acting like this?”

“Like what?” I asked, honestly unsure what he meant. “I can’t change my fate, and you know it. For all intents and purposes, I’m already dead. Whether that’s karma or fate or whatever, I don’t know, but who are we to try and fight it? If Olias wants to speed up the process...”

“Don’t act like a martyr.” His voice teetered toward pleading.

“Don’t make this a personal attack.” I countered. “This is what I’m used to.”

“To senseless acts of retribution?” He asked doubtfully.

“To my future being out of my hands. The first decision I ever made for myself was leaving father’s home. And look how that turned out. Some people are just pawns, put into place to help advance others. I have no purpose other than to follow orders. At home with my father, my brothers and sisters, Xian. And here with you, your father, and Olias. You have more power over my own life than I do.”

“You’re just willing to accept this?” James was incredulous, as though the thought of me denying my own liberties upset him.

“What?” I asked, “My death or my life?”

“Both!” He snapped. “You’re stubborn. Why aren’t you fighting?”

“You can’t fight fate.” I said with a small shake of my head. “Besides, what is there to fight? I’ve lived...that’s all I could do.”

“You haven’t lived. For God’s sake, you aren’t even eighteen! You’re practically a child.”

“Tomorrow.” I informed him briefly. “Tomorrow I will be eighteen. And I *have* lived. I’ve had good times and heartbreak, humiliation and glory. I’ve known fear and courage. What more could I get from this life?”

“How about happiness?” His voice was incredulous. “Or love? Life is about more than just crossing emotions off a list and then throwing in the towel. It’s not a race!”

“Maybe yours isn’t,”

He shook his head and for a moment he looked angry as he closed the space between us and pulled me to my feet. “What about passion?” He asked, his voice a new low. The music of it, soft and subtle, was bewitching.

I choked on my breath, unable to think of anything with him so close to me. My heart was beating its own new rhythm, abandoning my brain in haste to keep me breathing. But my brain would have been useless anyways, because James just barely brushed his lips against mine and I shut down. It wasn’t a kiss. It couldn’t be called a kiss. Not when we were just standing there, breathing the same air. Our lips just happened to be tantalizingly close. Any thoughts that may have been struggling to the surface of my brain were drowned out by the hammering of my heart. James didn’t pull back from me, and I sure as Hell wasn’t going to move away from him. That was all the approval he needed. He closed the small space between our bodies until I was sure he could feel the thud of an erratic heart against my rib cage, or the rapid rise and fall of my chest.

My brain seemed to try and tell me this was a bad idea, but I couldn’t decipher the jumble of thoughts that flitted through my mind. I didn’t want to listen to anything except for the music my heart was creating. I wanted to move into him closer, to grab his hand or throw an arm around his neck. My hand twitched, but I was scared to move, afraid he would realize what he was doing and stop.

I was kissing him back within an instant, and as it deepened I threw caution to the wind and moved my arm around his neck, pulling him closer. I felt like we were magnets, drawn together by some strange forces, neither

of us willing to disengage. But his lips left mine, leaving them cold, and traced my jaw. His hand brushed hair off of my shoulder as his lips rained gentle kisses down my neck.

He stopped so abruptly it was like a slap in the face and drew back as though he'd been scalded. Without his weight to anchor me to the spot I stumbled backwards and looked at him, bewildered. He seemed to be back to his anger, and I wanted to hate myself for kissing him back. But I couldn't. Without him close to me, nothing made sense anymore.

“This is a bad idea.”

His voice was an echo of something I had started to think a few minutes before, but now it sounded ridiculous. “No.” I shook my head.

“Yes it is. I shouldn't have done that.”

“You shouldn't have stopped.” I said, still breathless.

James wiped a hand over his face and down his lips, wiping away that kiss, massaging his chin in thought. “You've been drinking. You don't really want me to kiss you.”

“I...I know what I want.”

“No, you don't. You're upset. You don't have any control over your life and this is how you're trying to get some.”

“Stop trying to tell me how I feel.”

“You don't know.” He said, shaking his head. “You don't know anything, and it's my fault that you'll never figure it out. I'm sorry.” Before I could stop him, James was heading for the door.

“Don't leave.” I said, my voice edged in desperation. But whether he noticed or not, I had no clue, because he was already out the door. A few seconds later it closed behind him with a loud resonating click. I was alone again, but now it was different. I wasn't stuck, I wasn't hiding. I had been left behind. That was the worst kind of alone I could imagine.

I tried compartmentalizing my brain and my feelings, but couldn't make it far past fact. He had kidnapped me, and I knew that he could never truly love me because of what I was. He was using me to get what he wanted. He was a werewolf, my born enemy, and three years my senior. And of course, how could I forget the piece de resistance? I was dying.

But for all that, I couldn't help but find flaws in those arguments. I had a better life here than I'd had at fathers. And what did it matter if he was my enemy through blood and birth? Rules were meant to be broken. I was practically eighteen, and though he was older, I was probably just as mature as the run of the mill twenty one year old. He could never love me, but what did I need love for? I'd never felt it, and I could surely get through the next several days without it. He was using me as leverage, but at least he had kept me instead of leaving me out in the woods on my own. And the fact that I was dying made everything so much easier. It would be so much more simple, a way to avoid getting emotionally invested in one another.

On paper, my excuses for getting him out of my head sounded great. But my counter-arguments sounded equally as promising. I'd tried denial, attempted to ignore the feelings I'd begun to have for him, and that hadn't gotten me anywhere. But it couldn't have been him. He was dark and moody at the same time he was practically a saint. He could think of exactly the right thing to say to make me furious, and yet he had a way with words that was almost...gentle. It didn't matter if he was using me as a hostage or toying with me, because either way, I knew the true reason I hadn't yet left: I was powerless to resist him.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

James was nowhere to be found the next day. I chalked it up to his new-found kingly obligations. I hadn't seen Janna since she'd left dinner in a hurry the previous night, and now that I knew the story behind Olias' words, I was worried about her. It was a horrible fate for anybody, but to hear her sister's final, miserable moments laid bare like that in front of us all...Janna was strong, certainly, but I didn't know at what point she would break.

I set out to look for her, both because I was truly concerned for her and because I needed to talk. I'd slept late, and subsequently missed the guests taking their leave. Though the halls echoed with my footsteps, I relished the quiet. It allowed me the chance I needed to come to terms with what had happened last night. Now that the heat of the moment had come to pass, I could analyze my feelings without fear of making any hasty judgments. Although, I suspected that in the light of day, my feelings couldn't have changed that much.

What I knew was that I was inexorably drawn to him. What I didn't know was why. Perhaps it was simply a matter of chemistry, or kismet, or whatever it is that brings two people together. That was the most unlikely answer, but it was the one I favored, for it did not chain me to anything other than humanity, something I'd fought my entire life for.

James was strong, smart, and loyal. He acted on his passions, yet exercised enough control to keep me guessing. Even now, I didn't know where he was, what he was doing, and most frustrating of all, how he felt about me.

We were bonded, but did that create feelings within him that were untrue or give him an excuse to act upon them? He'd kissed me almost out of nowhere, but did that mean he felt something for me? Or had he simply been exercising his control over me because he could?

The questions consumed me so much that I lost touch with where I was going until I ran smack into someone. The force knocked me back, and I looked up, an apology on my lips. It died when I saw who it was that had nearly blown me over.

“Look what the cat dragged in,” Olias said, his voice low, rolling on a laugh. “Or, should I say the wolf.”

I graced him with a smile that took a lot of effort to find. “Hello.” I tried to make my voice pleasant, but a bitter edge managed to cut through it. I made to move around him, but he blocked me with an arm out.

“Not so fast. I had something to ask you.”

“Well, if you want to talk politics again, you can wait a few hours. I know you prefer to do that at the dinner table.”

“I don’t give a damn about politics.” He sneered. A shiver ran down my spine; something about him reminded me of Xian.

“Excuse me.” I attempted to shrug him off, but he didn’t move. Instead, he stood solid as a wall and gave me a once over, drinking me in from head to toe. His eyes lingered momentarily on my neck, and noticing that, I crossed my arms, defensive.

“Who do you think you’re fooling?” He asked, his expression dark. It looked like more than a few days had passed since he’d shaven...or slept, for that matter.

“What are you talking about?”

“Obviously there is something going on here. Something other than the lies you’ve been spreading.”

I swallowed, hoping I looked impassive or incredulous; anything but guilty. It took a lot of effort to make sure my voice didn’t tremble when I spoke. “I’m not sure I understand.”

“I’m talking about you and the accidental king. You’re not in love...that’s obvious. You played your guests. The question is, why?”

“I’m not...” I said, in shock. It served my purpose well. “I love him.”

“Maybe you do.” He shrugged, lifting one shoulder lazily. “And maybe you don’t. But do you really think that you would love him if you didn’t have to?”

“I *don’t* have to.”

His smile was just short of sympathetic. “Oh yes you do. He bit you?”

“Yes.” I don’t know why I admitted it, but Olias could have figured that out on his own anyways.

“Then you should know you’ve lost your free will. That bite bound you to him.”

“I’m aware.” I held my head up in defiance. “It doesn’t change anything.”

“Because you love him, right? But you don’t even realize what you’ve lost...what he’s taken from you.”

“James has given me more than I could ask for.” It was an automatic answer, but not practiced. I hadn’t intended to say that, but once it was in the air, I realized it was true.

“Right.” He nodded, unconvinced. “When he bit you did he tell you that it would keep you connected?”

“There wasn’t really time for that.”

“He didn’t warn you that once you were tied together there was no going back? There is no escape from this Hell...not even death?”

“You—”

“You’re his *prisoner*. His captive. That scar on your shoulder,” He nodded at the mark in question and I looked down to see that the wide cut of my shirt left the scar revealed. “It might fade, but what it means...that doesn’t. It’s not just for show. It’s a commitment for a reason. When he bit you he filled your bloodstream with drugs that confused your mind into thinking you love him. But it’s an illusion...a curse.”

“No.” I shook my head. “I love him because of who he is.” The words left my tongue before I had fully vetted them. I hadn’t meant to say I loved him.

“If you love him at all, it’s because you’ve been forced to. But look at the facts: he stole from you. Your dignity, your willpower, and your choice. He took all of that away from you without asking.”

“I don’t see why you care.” I moved to go past him, but Olias anticipated my move and stepped to the side, barring my path.

“Doesn’t it bother you,” He said slowly, sure to keep his voice low, “that you are nothing to him? You are a toy.” He lifted a hand and I stepped back reflexively, but the gesture wasn’t a threat in itself. “You’re scared. I see it in your eyes.”

His dark eyes trailed down my collar bone before creeping up to the other side of my neck where my hair hung in its usual place, concealing the marks that I so desperately despised. He brushed it away and his eyes widened. He’d pointed it out before that I had many scars, but up close, it was that much more obvious. Understanding seemed to ignite in him.

I tried to jerk out of his way and succeeded in moving half an inch before he pulled me back into place, knocking my head against the wall. Stars shot out before me in a burst of colors; nausea rolled in my stomach. “There are so many of them.” He sounded disgusted and awed at the same time. “What the hell happened to you?”

“I think you need to walk away,” I warned, feeling my anger beginning to grow, fueled by my embarrassment.

I was not as fearsome as I hoped, for he moved closer. Panic jolted through me, but I miscalculated. It was not my lips that Olias moved for with an open mouth. Instead, he swung his head over to the stretch of skin on my neck that was scarred with crescent bite marks and pressed his lips there, pausing to gauge my reaction in the tensing of my body. His teeth grazed my skin.

I thought of the training I’d done with Delilah. She’s insisted that I could not always be on the defensive...sometimes I would have to attack. I punched him as hard as I could. It wasn’t half as satisfying as I’d anticipated.

“Step away from her.” An icy voice broke through the sound of my heart pumping in my ears. Olias turned his head slowly, keeping his posture, and fixed Julius with a defiant look. I took the chance to knock

Olias in the head, causing a momentary confusion, which I manipulated to break away from his hold. I was standing behind Julius in the next instant, watching Olias struggle to regain his composure.

“What are you guys hiding?” He questioned, his eyes on me. The threat was not me, but Julius, and he knew that. We all did. And yet, Olias kept his eyes trained on me like a dog bracing for attack.

“Walk away.” Julius said by way of response. His voice was hard, but I recognized the authority. He may not be the king, but he had been born for the job all the same.

“Not until I know the truth.”

“The truth?” Julius sneered. “The truth will not bring Jocelyn back. It will not stop the pain.” His voice was cold and hard.

“Maybe not.” Olias agreed. “But she knows something, and if it will get me justice for her, I will do whatever it takes.”

“You’re delusional.” Julius sounded impatient.

“I’m not *imagining* the scars on her neck. The way some of them are ancient, but others...they look as recent as a few weeks ago.” He paused, watching for my expression. “What is it, Lilith? Am I on to something?”

I moved my hair to cover my neck more completely. My heart had squeezed into nothing more than a fist in my chest, refusing to beat. Olias’ grin remained, even as he walked away, knowing that the damage had been done. He had planted a seed of doubt. How could I trust my feelings for James when they were quite possibly manufactured?

Julius stared after him a moment, before turning to me. “Are you okay?” His eyes were filled with genuine concern. I managed a nod, and he straightened, preparing to turn away from me.

I caught his wrist before he could go, and as he looked at me I saw the curiosity etched on his face. Just two weeks ago, when Julius had interrogated me in the basement, he’d demanded answers. Now, Olias demanded the same, and Julius interfered upon my behalf. I didn’t know what had changed, but I knew the thread that connected him to Olias. “I’m sorry about your sister.”

His eyes narrowed the slightest bit, like maybe he didn't trust the sentiment. "It was a long time ago."

"Time doesn't heal all wounds." I knew as much from personal experience.

"No." He agreed. "But there's nothing for you to be sorry about."

Julius left then, in a hurry, and I wondered whether it was because he didn't believe his own words. As it was, I wasn't so sure myself.

I didn't see James until dinner that night. His empty seat had me worried, but Janna seemed unconcerned, so I tried to ignore the gnawing questions of what he could be up to as we made small talk. Julius' usual seat was vacant as well, but the queen sat straight in her chair, watching the people in the hall go about their business, her friends and family all under one roof. They were intriguing, these men and women who raised children with the greatest love and care, but swore to put allegiance to the Creator above anything else. They were confident that they'd never be asked to make a sacrifice that they couldn't handle, but I wasn't so sure.

James had only just sworn the oath himself, and yet he was already busy, missing meals to attend to matters I probably couldn't comprehend. Even before it had been official, he'd borne duties that seemed stifling. Then again, power had never really done it for me, maybe because I was born into it. Lucky me, I'd gotten a glimpse at the intoxicating allure of supreme rule from the inside, and I had to say it wasn't as glorious as it seemed. James' disappearance was proof of that.

After father, I had been the official second in command. What that meant, was that in the event of father's downfall, the inheritance would be mine. The vampires, the house, the fortune...all of it would fall to me. On paper, it sounded good enough, but it left me more susceptible than anyone might think. Feeding upon that power, Xian had targeted me from the very beginning. I had been naïve enough to assume that when he'd come to my father two years ago, it had been attraction or curiosity that drew us together. For me, it had been a bitter dose of both. For him, it had been the simple fact that I was a good strategy.

Xian used me to get close to my father...and not in the sense that we would sit around as a happy family and enjoy a nice home-cooked meal. It started as little more than respectful smiles in passing, and ended with Xian coming to believe he possessed me. He became my father's most trusted soldier and ally, truly the second in command, and by the time I realized what he'd done, his hooks in me were too deep to just walk away. What I didn't know, though, was that by the time I would gather the courage to walk away, I was Xian's favorite toy, one he'd not let go of without a fight.

James' entrance gathered the attention of everyone; they all looked up to smile his way. The smile was returned in kind, but as he took his seat I sensed something beneath the surface. "Did you get what you were looking for?" Janna asked, cutting a sharp look at him. James didn't respond, but Janna seemed happy enough, and she went back to telling me some story I wasn't really listening to.

When dinner was over, she stood and told me she had business to attend to, and so I wished her goodnight and turned to James. The entire day I'd been planning what I would say to him, about his feelings and mine and that kiss, but all of a sudden, I didn't know what words would be appropriate. He noticed me looking, but when he met my stare, it wasn't what I'd expected. He looked angry.

I swallowed any of the things that I might have eventually plucked up the courage to say and retreated to my room, feeling myself become angry too. I hadn't asked for any of this, and while James hadn't either, he had played a pretty big role in allowing it all to unfold. I'd had no choice in the matter of being bitten or brought here, but I'd had a choice presented to me just a few days ago and I'd ignored it. Now, I knew what I needed to do.

I'd come into this house with nothing but the clothes on my back and a necklace that had belonged to a dead woman, and now I had neither of those things. I dug into the dresser, producing my ripped jeans and a nondescript t shirt. I sat on the bed and laced my boots, my conviction growing with my unhappiness. This mess I'd come into, it was not what I'd wanted, not what I'd spent years dreaming of. It wasn't what I'd forsaken my family for, and if I wasn't wanted here, there was no reason to stay.

My heart warred with my mind and body, both of which led me out into the cold night, my back to the palatial house I'd begun to think could act as my home for the next few weeks. Just last night, when I'd been in James' presence, I might have said that I didn't need anything, but his absence made me realize I'd been lying to myself. Though Xian's

infatuation with me was a dozen different shades of screwed up, he'd brought me back from the edge of feeling numb, the way I had for years before him. His mind games and irrational anger aside, he'd let me feel again, even if it was fear that I'd come to know. After that, I couldn't live a life of apathy like the one I'd been stuck in since James had bitten me. I told myself that I needed to go somewhere that I could feel again, anything other than confusion and disappointment and anger. But something was trying to pull me back, and I couldn't figure out what it was.

I was halfway across the lawn by the time I realized just how much I didn't want to leave, and my anxiety reached a peak. Stubborn, I refused to allow myself to turn back, refused to admit I'd acted hastily, and so I plunged further into the maze of bushes, the moon roses and hawthorn even more tangled and beautiful than I'd remembered. When I saw a break in the trees, I ran for it, convinced that if I didn't, I'd never make it out alive. The wind howled in my ears, and the cold seized my lungs, choked by the cloying smell of the impending storm. Still I ran, until I emerged between the paths into the expanse of land that separated the woods from the werewolves' den, a length so great that the trees in the distance looked like little more than people.

“Lilith!”

I turned upon hearing my name, but didn't see anything. Shivering, I looked up at the top of the house, which could be seen from the outside of the maze, barely peeking above the tall shrubs. A voice in my head warned me not to do this, and as I was turning back to ignore it, I saw him. James was running toward me. A sigh escaped me and was devoured by the wind.

“What do you want?” I demanded as he stopped in front of me, fixing me with a very odd look.

“You’re leaving.” It wasn’t a question. Rather, he sounded disappointed, as though he had been hoping it wouldn’t come to this. Or

maybe that was my wishful thinking, looking for an excuse to stay.

“There’s nothing for me here.” I looked away, sure that if I saw those dark eyes watching me long enough, my resolve would disappear into thin air. “I stayed the weekend to help make an impression, out of respect for your father, but...”

He reached out lightly and tipped my chin up. Without thinking I met his eyes. “Last night...” He began.

“You don’t owe me anything.” I told him, prepared to turn away again. But that would mean looking away, and I couldn’t. I was hostage to his hand on my cheek, his eyes locked on mine.

“I owe you more than I could ever give you.” James looked sincere, but I didn’t understand. My mouth opened so I could say as much, but he shook his head. “Please, let me finish.” I bit my lip, not sure that it was a good idea, but nodded all the same. “Last night, you asked me not to leave. And I didn’t listen to you, because I was scared.”

“You were scared?”

“Lilith, in the whole time that you’ve been here, we’ve barely talked. I don’t know anything about you, but I do know that I don’t want you to leave. I know that I’d do almost anything to stop you from walking away right now.”

I shook my head, because it didn’t make sense. “You don’t really mean that?” My voice was sadly hopeful.

“I do.” He took my hand, offering a warmth that was entirely foreign to me, spreading from the inside out. “I care about you.”

I wavered, taken in by the sense of comfort that seemed to grow within me, but scared that I would stay and only make things worse for the both of us when the full moon approached. “You don’t care about me.” I shook my head. “I disgust you. You can’t even look at me.” My voice broke, and I knew tears were soon to follow. I could feel them pooling in my eyes, burning against the wind.

“That’s not true.” James said. “I’m proving it right now.”

“You run from me every chance you get.” My voice was thick with unshed tears now. “I am your enemy, one of the things that killed your sister. And now every time you look at me, you think of her. You look the other way when our eyes meet. You kiss me and then you leave...”

James’ hands tightened on my arms, and when I looked at him he was distraught. “Please tell me you don’t honestly believe that.”

A tear escaped, slipping quietly down my cheek. James caught it and wiped it away. “What am I supposed to believe?”

“Me.” He said. “Believe me when I say that you do not disgust me. From the first moment I saw you, you compelled me. I don’t see my sister when I look at you, and I don’t see my enemy. I see a girl whose life I ruined. I see someone who had a life of promise, who could have done any number of brilliant things if I hadn’t interfered. I don’t think of you as my mistake, Lilith, I think of myself as *your* mistake.”

I laughed, but it was a poor attempt to conceal a sob. “My mistake? My mistake was leaving my family. I’ve caused your entire family—your entire coven—nothing but misery. If I hadn’t left, Xian would have never attacked, your father would still be alive, and you wouldn’t be bound to a dying girl.”

James looked like I'd slapped him, and I thought maybe I'd gone too far by mentioning his father. But then he wrapped his arms around me, a gesture that took me by surprise, and pulled me closer to him. I could feel his heartbeat pressed against my chest, his warmth seeping into me. "I should have told you this sooner, but the bond doesn't create something that isn't there. It was approved because our paths crossed, one way or another. I didn't want you to think that whatever feelings you developed were forced on you, or manufactured. Maybe it was wrong of me, maybe it was selfish, but I've been terrified this whole time that if you knew the truth, that if you knew our destinies were involved, that you'd run the other way." I blinked, considering his words. He had been scared that I would reject him? "I avoided answering your questions and did my best to never catch your eye and take the other way when you were around because I wasn't ready to accept that my future was written for me. I didn't want you to feel the same, and so I kept you in the dark, at arm's length. I've never been this scared before."

"You're...scared of me?" It seemed ridiculous that this man twice my size and with the claim of a King would be scared of me.

"Not of you." His hand found mine, lacing our fingers together. "Of what you could do to me. If you left right now, I don't think I'd ever be the same, not because I bit you and that makes us connected, but because of what lies between us...what it could be if it had the chance to grow."

My heart crashed against my ribcage and came to a faltering stop. I think the whole world stopped, if only for a moment. Or maybe that moment grew into something greater in my memory, stretched infinitely so that I could remember every detail, every facet of that night. I didn't know how I felt, exactly. I'd thought I knew what love was one time, but I'd been wrong. I felt like an emotional roller coaster. I was happy when he was around, and I missed him when he was gone. Every feeling in his presence was heightened, multiplied to a level of passion that I couldn't begin to understand.

Though I didn't know how I felt, I was certain of what I wanted. I wanted to stay wrapped up in his arms, kiss his lips, and sit at his side. I wanted to stay with James and see what would happen. Perhaps we *were* destined to be together, or perhaps we would never move beyond this

mutual attraction. I wouldn't know if I didn't stay. That reward made the risk worthwhile.

"Ok." The word was squashed when he pulled me in tighter, his large arms offering a kind of shelter from the wind. I buried my face in his chest and held tight for a long while, unmoving as the wind whipped around us and the sounds of the woods beckoned. When he pulled away much too soon it was to grace me with a smile. His eyes danced with excitement.

"We never did get to finish the conversation from the other day." James said, leading me back toward the house with my hand in his. But we didn't go inside; he veered away at the mouth of the maze, leading me to the courtyard.

A week ago, the courtyard had hosted a diner set and something that looked like a tea party. Just a few nights ago, it had housed hundreds of chairs at the king's funeral. But tonight as we approached, the courtyard was empty. White lights twinkled in the bushes, candles hung in glass lanterns from the branches of a tree, and there was a blanket laid flat underneath it. "I didn't get you anything for your birthday," he warned. "But I thought that maybe you'd accept some answers?"

I'd never seen anything quite so spectacular. The lights in the bushes illuminated the moon rose so that they glowed a soft and creamy white. The shadows cast on the ground around us were like stars, dancing on the concrete as the candles shifted. "Yes," I said, looking around in awe. "Answers are more than enough."

We sat together on the blanket, which was covered in pillows, and looked up at the stars. I kicked off my boots. The hedges blockaded the wind almost entirely, so that when we positioned our bodies just so, we were both perfectly warm in spite of the chill. All that could be seen of the wind was the way that the candles swung gently in their jars above us.

By the time we were situated, I was beginning to feel drowsy with the downy sense of warmth he gave me, so much so that when he asked what I wanted to know, I simply told him “Tell me everything.”

My request must have seemed strange to him, if the way his lips curled in amusement was any indication. “Have you ever heard the phrase ‘sealed with a kiss?’” I nodded and made some sound of acknowledgement. “It originated from a sacred line of oaths, the kind which demand a physical seal.”

I stared at him for a moment, and when he turned to look at me finally I couldn’t help but laugh. “I don’t understand.”

“Words are beautiful, majestic, even, but they simply don’t bear the weight of promise. Thus in all unearthly promises, the ones that are meant to transcend time, physical seals must be utilized. The seal bearing our devotion to the Creator comes in the form of the celestial kiss, or as we so eloquently call it these days, the bite. When a werewolf bites another, those people are swearing to spend eternity in devotion to each other.”

“Forever is a long time.” It was an errant thought, but it slipped past my lips.

“Yes,” James agreed, “But for some people, forever is not enough. The sentiment behind the kiss is quite interesting.”

“Tell me?” I begged.

“Long before women had dowries or were considered their father’s property, people used to swear their love to one another before God himself. It wasn’t a big affair, just two suitors who went to pledge themselves to each other with God as their witness. Though it was a simple gesture, the weight of that promise meant a lot, and the Lord asked that if two people were so certain of themselves as to take the vow, that they never

ask for it to be broken. And so it was for a time, until one of the couples who'd pledged themselves asked for the vow to be broken. You see, when they'd come to him to profess their love, the Creator had feared that pride would be the downfall of their relationship. The woman was the most sought after in all her village and the man was rumored to have procured interest in more than a few ladies. But God granted their request, only for them to return months later. The man had been bitten while away on business, and his wife could no longer stand the sight of him, a monster in her mind. He might have been able to live like that if it weren't for the love of another to remind him that he deserved more than what he got from his wife.

"They went to God and begged for him to absolve them of their responsibilities to one another, but the Creator was disappointed. He refused to grant the request unless he could prove that his new love truly would stay at his side. He demanded a seal...He said that if She would stay with him, she must become what he was. If they wanted to be together, she had to be turned into a werewolf so that she would understand her husband completely. The happy couple obliged, and the mother of werewolves Celeste was born. Their devotion to one another only seemed to grow over this shared condition. Their love became a beacon, something to which all other's aspired. They called it the Celestial Kiss."

"But wasn't the point that if their love was true, they'd make sacrifices for one another?"

"It is." James nodded. "Celeste's sacrifice was her humanity. Her husband's was that he must break another oath...to never hurt a human."

"It sounds like Celeste got the worst of it." I muttered.

James shrugged. "I imagine it wasn't easy to put the woman he cared for through that ordeal, particularly soon after living it himself. Celeste suffered physically, but watching her, knowing that her agony was at his hand, couldn't have been anything less than torture."

I considered those words, how he'd just told me that he'd avoided me because he couldn't bare to admit that he'd put me in this position. James seemed to know exactly how Celeste's husband had felt.

"And what happened to his old wife?" I wondered. "She broke the oath too, by refusing to love him after he'd been bitten."

"She did. And so she was punished accordingly. She became incapable of loving or being loved ever after."

"That's a bit harsh," I muttered.

A rain drop loosed itself from the sky, landing on my forehead; I wiped it away and another took it's place. The evening sky had gone from blue to black in a matter of minutes. The sky would very soon split into two and pour out it's tears.

James didn't seem bothered by that. He stopped and faced me. "Our ancestors believed that your soul lived in the air you breathed. It explained what happened when you quit breathing, after all. It's why when people shared a kiss at their wedding, their souls, previously two halves," He held his hands up inches apart by way of illustration, before pressing them together "became one again."

I smiled in spite of myself, trying to think of what could possibly follow up such a beautiful ideology. A clap of thunder, seemingly just overhead, caused me to jump toward James, who grinned and stood, pulling me up with him. "Come on."

We ran hand in hand for the front door, the rain picking up by the second. Sloshing through the mud until we were covered in it, breathless and drenched, we shut the door behind us. Just in time, it seemed, as the

sound of the rain increased, drumming raucously on the roof. For a few seconds I entertained the idea of going back to his room and engaging in whatever may follow, but he turned past the staircase, pulling me into the library after him instead. We stood together in the darkness for a few moments, breathing in the intoxicating smell of paper and leather and each other, until he turned and flicked on a light. Sconces on the walls flickered to life, bathing everything in a soft glow. I pulled away from him enough to look around. It was more romantic than it had been when he'd first brought me here, probably because I no longer hated him. Watching the rain roll down the windows, being in the center of the storm without being in it, certainly didn't hurt.

"What are we doing here?" I whispered, lest my voice break whatever spell this was.

"Magic," He smiled in spite of my dubious look. "What, you don't believe?"

"There's no such thing." But he was making me smile now, too.

"I disagree." He brushed a strand of rain-soaked hair from my face. "Humans think there's no such thing as you or me, but here we are."

"Standing inexplicably in a library..."

"I think there is magic all around us, all the time. But particularly right now, in the way the rain is streaming down the window, in the way you made me go from terrified to thrilled with one little touch, and especially in the way you're looking at me right now."

Nothing I could say would hold any water after that, so I contented myself with a smile. "Ok. And what act of magic are we performing today?"

“All of them.” James whispered it against my lips, but his eyes stayed on mine. We stood locked in time. Perhaps this was the magic, being enchanted by each other as such. I ached for him to kiss me, to close that gap like he had yesterday, but he stayed still. My lips twitched in anticipation. *Breathe in*, I reminded myself. *Breathe out*.

It felt like years had passed before he finally kissed me, and when he did, it didn’t last; He pulled away much too soon. I wanted more, but I was grateful for the fire he lit instead.

James sank onto the massive couch, a hand outstretched as an offer to join him. I did so gladly, filling in the spot under his arm so that our bodies pressed together. I laid my head against his chest.

We watched the fire flicker before us, and within moments, the rhythm of his heartbeat had lulled me half asleep. “Tonight, our greatest act of magic is just going to be that we are alive. And that’s enough. Tomorrow, we’ll start the real work.”

“Which is what?” I yawned, suddenly tired from the warmth and the crackling flames, the steady rain and the comfortable weight of his arm around me.

His breath tickled my ear when he whispered, “Saving your life.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

When James set another book before me, I groaned. Not because I meant to—it was supposed to be one of those inward sort of things—but because we'd been in the library almost exclusively since yesterday. I didn't count the morning's sojourn for breakfast, which hadn't been more than the ten minutes we needed to gorge ourselves on pancakes and fresh fruit. I loved reading, the smell of books, the feel of ink etched into paper, but I'd had enough. The print was blurring together and I'd reread the same paragraph of the last book about fifty times.

"Don't sound so grateful," Janna licked a finger before turning the page in her own book. "We're only trying to keep you alive." I caught a glimpse of the grin on her face venturing towards a smirk.

"Come on, Janna, this is stupid and you know it." I stood up, tossing the book onto the table next to the plush leather chair I'd been sitting in. I'd been there so long, there was an indent perfectly contoured to my body. My back ached and my eyes were burning.

"You think that this is *stupid*?" Janna's voice was incredulous. As much as she wanted to help save me, she was getting tired of too. But she hadn't slept here last night on a small couch in wet, sticky clothes, so my sympathy for her was menial. "You think that *life* is stupid?"

"I think that we aren't going to find answers buried in these books." I gestured towards the floor to ceiling shelves. It made me feel small and inconsequential. "If there is a solution and if it's here, there are so many books...even with three of us, it would take a month to read them all."

"Don't give up yet," James said softly, looking up from the book he'd been immersed in. The idea seemed to cause him actual pain. Or maybe he, too, was more tired than he let on. "Have some patience."

"I regret to inform you that 'patience' is not in my vocabulary. I can't sit still."

“Well, patience is a noun, meaning the capacity to overcome or endure without growing frustrated.” Janna looked serious, and yet she had to know I wasn’t.

“I know what patience is, Merriam-Webster. Are you reading a dictionary over there or trying to figure out how to stop me from tearing myself limb from limb?” My voice didn’t have quite the teasing edge I’d intended, but I couldn’t keep back my frustration. Maybe I really did need to work on that whole patience thing. I sighed. “This isn’t working.”

James shut his own book, the page carefully marked, and came to my side. Janna ducked behind the cover of her book as her brother placed his hands gently around me, but then peeked above the edge, curious. His touch alone sent a spark through my heart, but the way his eyes held mine...the intensity...

“Trust me.” He said. “I know it’s a lot to ask of you, but please try.”

I didn’t realize I’d been biting my lip until I flicked my tongue over it and tasted blood. This wasn’t helping. Nearly twelve hours we’d been in their father’s study, poring over books of all sort: large and small, typed and handwritten, bound in leather or printed on loose paper. And all we’d come across that was even remotely helpful was an account of a werewolf who’d been bitten by a vampire and was never seen again. There was no mention of what happened to a vampire bitten by a werewolf, nor was there even a single word (as I had suspected) about a half-human half-vampire creature. Once again, I slipped through the cracks. The only difference was that this time I was dragging James and Janna down with me. I couldn’t bring myself to tell James all of that, though.

“For what it’s worth I agree with the girl.” Janna said, inclining her head toward me. “Really, James. We might have better luck elsewhere.”

“Like *where*?” His voice cracked under the weight of his desperation. His infinite patience seemed geared towards me, because I needed it; with his sister, I could tell just how wary and exhausted he truly was. Here he was trying to be strong, to hold out hope, and I was undermining him at every chance. I couldn’t change how I felt, but I could

change how I reacted. I resolved to attempt positivity, but my resolve wavered the minute Janna opened her mouth.

“I know you guys aren’t going to like this, but I say we start with Olias.”

James’ nose wrinkled in disdain.

“Olias?” I almost laughed.

Janna shrugged, not offended by my doubt. “Jocelyn died because she was bitten. And then he just disappeared for the next two years. Don’t you think he would have tried to figure out if he could have stopped it?”

“No.” James said shortly. “She’s dead, and Olias knows that. Nothing can bring her back.”

“Have you forgotten just how thick headed he is? Do you really think that he just accepted it?” Janna’s mouth tweaked into a small, sad-looking smile, and she shook her head in response to her own question. “He still hasn’t given up hope.” She looked at me knowingly. “I heard about your little run-in with him the other day?”

James looked between us. “What run-in?”

“It was nothing. Besides, he wouldn’t help us even if he could.”

“Yes, he would,” Janna’s voice was one of quiet determination, but she hesitated just a second before continuing. “For the right price.”

“Forget it, Janna.” James’ voice was lofty. He almost sounded like a father warning a child not to try and steal a cookie from the jar. “He can’t help us.”

“You won’t know until you try,” Janna countered. “Cost-benefit analysis, James. What would you do?”

James looked resigned, but I thought I saw a flicker of agreement in his dark eyes. He was about to speak when the door burst open.

“There’s a vampire in the foyer,” She said, looking at James without any doubt that he could fix it. “Come quick!”

I exchanged a glance with James and then, abandoning our conversation, practically ran out the door.

Xian had the audacity to walk in the house this time. He stood in the hall being watched by a crowd of people. Young children stared at him in horror, mothers moved to protect them, and men braced for attack. He didn't seem too concerned, though, leaning against the door with his hands in the pockets of his suit jacket. When he saw me, his face lifted from its nonchalant observation into a large, poisonous smile. "Lilith." He held his arms out in a sweeping gesture, as if he were *trying* to draw everyone's attention to me.

"What are you doing here?" I'd intended to ask that, but the words congealed in my throat. James had been hot on my heels, and he beat me to it. It was a guttural threat, one that even gave me chills. I'd seen him angry, but this was a shade darker. The jury was out on whether the humans responsible for his father's murder had been working on Xian's behalf.

"I've come to bring Lilith home, of course. I told you I wouldn't give up on you." Xian winked at me, daring me to remember that moment in my father's house.

"Lilith isn't going anywhere with you." Janna said. The fury was evident in her sharp voice.

Xian fixed his eyes on her and something in his expression shifted... maybe even softened. It was gone just as quickly as it had appeared, and a smile made itself at home on his pale lips. When his eyes flashed to James, it slipped entirely. "I've sweetened the deal since before. I have it on good authority that the vampires will entirely relocate in exchange for her return." He held his hands out all around him. "You let her leave here with me right now, and I can guarantee you that you'll never see either of us again."

"You're not negotiating over me." I said, just loudly enough to draw Xian's attention. All too aware of the several eyes on us, I straightened, holding my head higher.

“Hush, darling, and let the big kids handle this.” He winked and turned from me in the same smooth instant. “What do you say, comrade? It’s what you wanted...better even.”

“Leave here.” James managed to command through a clenched jaw. “And do not *ever* return.” His words were clipped and terse; his face was red. I couldn’t let him lose his composure...not with an audience of innocent bystanders.

“That offer has expired.” I stepped up next to James.

“So soon?” Xian asked. “But he was there just last week, trying to trade you for anything he could get. Now the offer’s expired?” His eyes shifted from me to James, suspicion souring on his face. “What’s changed?”

“Nothing.” I said, at the same time that James said “Everything.”

Xian smirked as the realization settled over him. “Oh. Do you think you love her?” He snorted, but I didn’t miss the way his eyes hardened when James grabbed my hand. “You do!” He laughed. “No wonder you were so desperate to get rid of her. Such a mighty fall for you. The king...in love with a lowly vampire.”

His voice cast a chill around the room. I just barely lifted my eyes to see some of the faces that I’d come to recognize... Cat and Iz, leaning together a few feet away, Desmond standing at the ready should James give a command. Through the crowd, I saw somebody step forward, moving toward Xian without any hesitation. Julius. “If you value your life or your legs you’ll walk away while you still can.” He warned.

“No, I don’t think I will. In fact, I’ll have a bourbon while your brother reconsiders.”

Julius was at his throat in an instant, his thick hands around Xian’s much less-muscled neck. A woman’s startled scream cut through the tension. “Stay away from us.” Julius growled.

“There’s nothing to consider.” James said calmly. He didn’t seem at all bothered by the fact that Julius looked on the verge of murder.

“Let him go!” Janna commanded her brother, a current of hysteria running through her voice like electricity.

Xian eyed Julius in distaste; His expensive Italian leather shoes just barely skimmed the floor. He tried to speak but it came out a strangled sound.

“Julius!” Janna screamed. Around us, everyone was watching in intrigued horror. I couldn’t decide whether James allowing them to witness this was detrimental to his reign.

“James,” I elbowed him in the side. “Do something!”

James’ eyes lingered on mine a long moment, and then he turned back to Julius with a resigned sort of sigh. “Let him down.”

Julius moved so slowly that I didn’t think he was going to listen, but eventually Xian’s feet touched the ground again and he spluttered, tugging at his tie in order to straighten it. He was fighting to look collected and dignified, smoothing his light hair back into place, all the same while trying to catch his breath. His normally bone-white skin was the color of a fire, a fine complement to the anger searing in his eyes. Any pretense of cool and care-free was gone.

“Why don’t you take your leave now?” James suggested calmly.

“You don’t want to make an enemy of me.” Xian hissed, pointing a finger in warning.

“I think it’s too late for that.” James was walking toward him, and Xian was moving accordingly toward the door. Once he was over the threshold, he spoke again, empowered by his movement as if James wouldn’t step into the brisk evening and give chase to him.

“No, see I’m a man of reason. I’ll give you one more chance. Drop Lilith off at the house tomorrow by noon and I’ll forget that any of this ever happened.”

“And when I don’t?” James was the one smirking now, obviously not worried by Xian’s threats. At least, not visibly.

“You’ll regret it.”

James let the door slam into place, and turned back towards everyone with a blank expression. “Don’t let the words of a fool frighten you.” He said it so smoothly, so serenely it couldn’t be anything but placating. “You have nothing to fear from him.”

The crowd seemed reassured by his sentiments, and they broke up, dismissing themselves. When I looked up, it was to see the Queen standing at the top of the steps, her cold eyes fixated on me. Maybe my nerves had strengthened, or maybe she had accepted the fact that James wanted me here, but she seemed less hateful than the last time I’d seen her at James’ coronation.

I wondered whether she couldn’t read my thoughts because she nodded, an almost imperceptible movement, and then turned away. I stared up at the spot she’d been until James put a gentle hand on my shoulder, drawing my attention away.

I wanted to believe James. I truly did. But I had known Xian long enough to know that he did not break his threats. Only promises.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Xian's threat tortured my thoughts. James had said he had to see his mother, and when I baldly refused to go with him, ditched me in my room. Janna apologetically informed me that she was dead tired and slipped off to her own room. Just like that, I was alone again. Even my dear friend sleep didn't want anything to do with me. Or else, my thoughts didn't want anything to do with sleep.

I didn't know what Xian had meant when he said that James would regret it, but I did know Xian. When it came to power, he was undeniably true to his word. Once he'd attained what he wanted, however, his word was worthless. Xian wanted me, and I still couldn't figure out why. At one point, I'd assumed his intent was to get my father in his pocket by controlling me. Now, my father could not have cared any less what happened to me. I'd have thought Xian's obsession with me would have ended when my father's patience with me had ended. That it hadn't been laid to rest was troubling to me.

Of course, it wasn't love that he felt for me. It couldn't have been. He'd claimed it was before, a couple of times, and I'd believed him. I knew better now. Xian was cold in every manner of the word. He didn't even know what love was. If he was telling the truth, then circumstances would have been different. If he really had loved me, he wouldn't have pushed me this hard. If he cared about me *at all*, I'd probably never have met James...

No. Xian had a reason for wanting me, and it was not even slightly obvious. That was disconcerting in and of itself, but there was something else that weighed on my mind. Just two weeks ago, father had vehemently denied James' proposal. Last week, Janna said that she'd renegotiated with my father. Now, suddenly, he was sending Xian to retract his earlier refusal? And there was another thing... He was sending Xian to do his dirty work... the only kind of work that he actually liked.

No, Father was stubborn. I had a hard time believing that he had really changed his mind. Moreover, I had a hard time believing that he would send Xian to fetch me. He was too prideful. Sending a third party onto werewolf territory only seemed cowardly, and father wouldn't have

anyone think him a coward. Nothing about it seemed right, but I couldn't figure out exactly what was wrong about it either.

All of those concerns pressed in and around my brain until I couldn't handle it any longer. After spending all day locked in the study, my lungs ached for fresh air. Though the sky had threatened rain all day, it hadn't followed through yet. I wanted to make it back before it got the chance.

It was late, and silent as a crypt except for the noise I made trying to sneak out without waking anybody. There was a door open up the hall, giving me cause to move extra stealthily. A faint light, probably from a flickering candle, caught my attention. I'd probably not have thought much about it, except for that as I passed I caught a drift of Janna's voice. She was speaking in a language I didn't understand, presumably the same one that James had spoken at the funeral. Something about her tone of voice, the way the words sounded, was almost...seductive. I didn't catch the whole of what she was saying, but I tuned in just in time to hear her say my name, and then after a few seconds, "Please."

The silence that followed it felt heavy, almost stifling enough that I wanted to make my presence known. Before I could, a sigh punctured the quiet. "I know it's the right thing to do, but I don't put much stock into things like what's right and fair." The voice was male; the switch to English was welcome.

"I know." Janna's voice was subdued, less intense now. "But if for nothing else, do it for me. I know it's strange, but it's important to me."

When her companion responded, it was in that foreign tongue, and I didn't see what any of it had to do with me. Janna laughed. "You know you can't resist something that makes me happy."

I pulled away from the wall, inexplicably uncomfortable. The conversation didn't concern me anymore, and I had no right listening in as it was. I forced myself to carry on down the hall, trying to recognize where I'd heard that voice. I'd met so many new people in the last few weeks, which made deciphering one from the other next to impossible. And yet something told me I should know who it was.

I'd meant to go to the courtyard and sit on the bench where James and I had lunch the day his father died, but with the sky's impending

upheaval, it seemed wise to stay close. It seemed I wasn't the only one in need of some fresh air. James sat on the edge of the fountain, hands folded in his lap. He stayed still as I moved to stand next to him, staring out at the hazily illuminated trees. He seemed to be deep in thought, so I stared out there and considered the boundaries too.

Everything beyond the first line of trees was dark and indecipherable. But I knew they were out there; the first line of defense. Cam and Iz and Desmond, Connor, and the others I hadn't been introduced to. They were out there, and possibly with a traitor among them. Hell, one of them could even be the traitor who had helped Xian get in.

"You couldn't sleep either?" James asked. Pale light glanced off his tanned skin, making him practically glow around the edges. I shook my head. James unfolded himself and held out an arm. I needed no further invitation to sit curled against his chest. Both of his arms wrapped around me, forming a circle that felt to me safer than anything possible.

Just days ago we'd been playing hot and cold. I'd seen his flaws and his strengths long before and been both repulsed and attracted. Pressing my body into his now felt both right and not real, as though it were the quasi-dream-like state that closely precedes sleep. I didn't understand the evolution of my own feelings, whether they were forced upon me or pulled up from some place I didn't realize even existed. But with him there, it didn't feel necessary to question it.

I was silent for a long while, reveling in the comfort of his touch, but after a while I had to make my doubts known. I couldn't cheat him by pretending I was care-free, when I was in reality anything but. "He meant what he said, James. Xian won't stop."

I said it quietly, so that I almost wondered if James even heard me. He was quiet for a couple of seconds and then let go of a reluctant sigh, "I know."

I was grateful that James couldn't see my face. The fear there had to be all too palpable. The racing of my heart was bad enough, whether it be brought on by our proximity or my anxiety over Xian's intentions. "What are we going to do?"

"I don't know yet," James admitted. My lip trembled; I inhaled a shaky breath, forcing myself to peel away from him so I could turn and look

him in the face. I grabbed his hand instead, admiring the way it wrapped so completely over mine.

“I’m scared.”

I hated admitting that, but if there was anybody I could trust, it had to be James. Just a few days before I wouldn’t have been able to say that, but something had changed now; I could feel it.

“I won’t let him hurt you.” James said, brushing a lock of hair away from my face.

“That’s not what I’m worried about.” I shook my head. “Xian can do nothing to hurt me that he hasn’t already done.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I’m worried about what he’ll do to you, to your people, your family. He is capable of so much.”

“I know. I hope you realize...whatever happened in your past, you can tell me. Whatever he did to you.”

The offer caught me off guard; I stared dumbly at him a second before looking away. James turned me back to him. His face was soft, imploring me to trust him. “Nothing I can’t live through.” I feigned a smile that wavered around the edges and was gone too soon.

But James wasn’t satisfied with that answer. He kept looking at me, as if he were trying to figure it out for himself. My past was part of me...a gnarled, forsaken part of me, but one all the same. “It’s tragically cliché. I thought I loved him when I was too naïve to know what love was. And he took advantage of that.”

“You mean you.” James said flatly. “He took advantage of *you*.”

It was an uncomfortable truth. I bit my lip. “He was stupid enough to think I would stick around no matter what. But you don’t tell someone you love them one minute, and then hurt them the next. I thought it was okay for a long time. My own father wasn’t much different, claiming tough love whenever he brushed me off.” Talking about this made me uncomfortable. I’d never discussed it with anyone. Occasionally we’d get caught in a compromising position, but most of my brothers and sisters were happy to look the other way. They didn’t question the bruises or the bite marks, and they didn’t object to my already scant presence waning.

They only knew that when he'd first arrived, I had changed from the naïve and hopeless girl. I'd become stronger in his presence, apt to see them all in a new light. They had noticed back then that I was more social, that I went to their parties and listened to their stories. They *didn't* notice when I stopped doing that. In fact, by the time Xian and I ended things just a few months ago, nobody wondered what happened.

This had been my private shame for so long that sharing it with James felt weird. I didn't like that it made me sound helpless. Or, for that matter, that it made me *feel* helpless. I looked down and noticed the book in James' lap.

He followed my gaze, flipping it over in his hands. "It was my sister's. I took it from you because it belonged to Jocelyn, and I didn't want to share it. But more than that, I didn't want you to know about her." He held it out for me to take, so I did. "It was cowardly, Lilith, but I didn't want you to know what happened to her because I didn't want you to know what could happen to you. I wanted you to have some kind of hope that we could fix it...that I could fix it. I still want you to believe in me. I'm not done trying yet."

I didn't know if it was normal that I had a limited time left to live, and yet I spent it worrying about what would happen to everyone else when I was gone. Probably not. But then I hadn't cared about what happened to me for a while. The only difference was that now I had something to lose. I clutched Jocelyn's journal between my hands. Had she felt the same?

"I am giving it back to you now because I read it all." James' voice broke the silence. "I wish I hadn't. If she had wanted me to know those things, she would have told me. But I can't go back, and I think that it might...help you."

"Help me?" How could she help me when she'd been dead for two years? I didn't dare say that aloud.

James took my hand; I witnessed in that moment a very rare, fleeting glimpse of vulnerability. "I don't know what you've been through, or understand what you're going through, but I think Joss would have. I think you have more in common than even you initially thought."

"James..." I started, thinking of all the reasons why he shouldn't say that, why I didn't want to be like his deceased sister. I let them dissolve

on my tongue. “Thank you.”

James was alight with a new kind of intensity. “I will not let him hurt you again, Lilith. Not ever.”

I shook my head, for lack of anything to say, but James enveloped me into a hug. The warmth of that, at least, chased away the cold that had seemed to take up residence in my bones. My heart constricted with the passion of his words. A knot had found its way into my throat, which felt like sandpaper, but I finally managed to admit what had been weighing on my mind all day. “It’s you I’m worried about.”

“Me?” James’ dark eyebrows knitted together. “You don’t have to worry about me.”

“Whatever Xian aims to do...it’s not good. I don’t know why he thinks he wants me, but I know that he won’t stop fighting until I’m dead...or he is.”

“And I won’t stop fighting until he’s dead, or I am.”

“James,” I shook my head, but didn’t have a chance to finish my warning.

“If he starts a fight, I’ll finish it.”

“And in doing so, you’ll start a war!” I pulled away a bit so he could see just how serious I was. “I’m not worth that.”

“You’re worth more than you know,” He said softly. “Whatever happens between the vampires and werewolves isn’t because of you. This has been a long time coming.”

“I won’t watch him tear this town apart.” It was a warning. If the situation got bad, I would do whatever was necessary to keep things from unraveling.

“And I won’t let that happen, Lilith.” James pursed his lips together. He knew I was right. “I can promise you this. The only way we will go to war is if he violates the accords. He got a pass for coming into my home because I did the same to him.”

His words didn’t serve their purpose; I still felt nauseous with thoughts of what he could do to make life miserable for the werewolves. An idea had been toying at the back of my brain. It was not necessarily the

route I wanted to take, but it was the one that was righteous. “We can stop this before it starts... It’s as easy as letting me go.”

He shook his head without missing a beat. “Letting you go wouldn’t be easy.”

“What’s easy and what’s right are often two different things.” I reminded him.

“Do you *want* to go, Lilith?”

“Of course I don’t!” I snapped, offended by the very idea of what he insinuated. “But I’m willing to do whatever I have to.”

“Good. Because I’m willing to do whatever it takes to keep you safe.” He leaned in to kiss my forehead. I let my eyes flutter closed; there was no winning this conversation. For now, at least, it was over. Just in time, too because that was when the screaming started.

We turned at the same time, and I saw the wolf barreling for us at top speed before anything else could come into focus. James stood up so fast that if I had still been leaning against him, I’d probably have fallen into the fountain. I rose too, but James was like a lightning bolt even with on two feet. It was several seconds before I caught up to where he stood intently focused on the wolf who stood anxiously at his feet. They seemed to be communicating, despite the fact that they were making no noise.

James spared me a glance and just barely had time to command “Stay here” before he took off at a sprint. I waited, breathless, as I watched his form grow smaller and smaller, until he was swallowed up by the dense night forest. I had no idea what happened, but the screaming continued to pierce the air, the throaty sound of intense pain giving way to fear and then to anguish, each scream tearing loose from somewhere deep and cold and terrifying. My heart was beating too hard; I wiped sweaty palms on my jeans.

I jumped at a sudden flash of movement in the trees and immediately hated myself for it. Someone laughed, and a chill swept over me like ice over water. I knew that soulless sound all too well.

Xian was behind me in an instant, and I jumped again at his touch. It was just a hand brushing hair from my neck, but he may as well have stabbed me between the ribs. I turned to face him, forcing my fear down within me. His face was smooth and calm. The rage I had seen earlier that

night had disappeared, and he seemed as impassive as ever. His eyes, such a dark blue they could have melted into the night sky were it not for his pale face, looked hungry. “I did that for you, Lilith. Remember that.”

“What did you do?” I wanted to step back, to be out of his reach, but I didn’t want him to see me do it.

Xian looked at me with something like pity and patted my cheek. I cringed from his touch. “One dead and one turned. This is the first night he has refused me, Lilith. On the second night there will be two dead and two turned. Each night you’re away from me, I’ll kill and turn them accordingly. Think about it, darling. Is your life *really* worth all that?” A smile tweaked his lips.

I didn’t know how to answer that, but it didn’t matter. He was gone in a matter of seconds, leaving me to contemplate the question in silence until a hulking wolf rushed by, nearly knocking me off my feet. It wasn’t James but he was close behind, a small figure draped across his arms. My cheeks warmed at the sight of his bare chest, at the thought of that woman pressed up against my naked...what was he, really? My boyfriend? It was ridiculous, but it was a thought that I couldn’t push away. A few weeks ago, I’d more or less been that girl. He’d held me like that against his warm body, and I had missed it.

All longing disappeared when he was close enough for me to see that he was covered in blood. My stomach dropped at the sight of it. “James?” I called, my voice wavering with panic.

Julius appeared at my side. “Go to the cellar.” He commanded, quickly and fiercely. “The last door on the left is Delilah’s. Tell her what happened, and run.”

I nodded, without even contesting the fact that I didn’t know exactly how to get to the cellar or what had happened.

I ran, stumbling over my own feet as my vision cut back and forth between where I was going, the lifeless figure in James’ arms, and the day the King had been killed.

Delilah’s door gave way under my assault, swinging open to find her sitting up in her bed, cross-legged and slack-jawed. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“I’m sorry to frighten you,” I panted, too breathless to be bitter. “Someone’s hurt. James is bringing her in now.”

The anger slipped off her face. Delilah was on her feet in an instant, rushing to a dresser standing on the far wall. “What happened?” She demanded.

“I...I don’t know.”

She spun and fixed me with a look that could only be described as doubt. Xian’s warning tickled my neck. *Kill one, change one.*

“She may have been attacked by a vampire.”

Delilah stood up slowly, looking rightfully exhausted. I'd pulled her from bed in the thick of night, and still she was hardly dressed under her robe.

The woman lying on the bed was pale and shaking, inches from death. I didn't doubt she could feel it breathing down her neck. I'd seen this, what the woman was going through, so many times I couldn't even count them, but it still made me sick... With fear, with nausea, with rage.

"Well?" James demanded, in a tone I'd never heard him use with anyone other than me. He was so angry, I could practically see him quaking with suppressed fury. The line of his jaw seemed composed of steel.

He'd blessedly put on jeans, but I still couldn't look at him long. Even under a thin coat of dried blood, the sight of him shirtless made me squirm, and not in a bad way. And yet, he was so irate that he wouldn't have noticed.

"She was not as lucky as the other one." Delilah said, glancing at the figure clutching the bed sheets between her bloody fingers. She wouldn't let Delilah near her, and so Delilah had kept a small distance, her voice and gestures much softer than I'd have expected. They could do nothing for her now, anyways.

The other one... The woman who Xian had killed. She thought the dead one was lucky, that this young woman who was writhing in agony had been dealt a fate worse than death. I didn't disagree.

"We have to kill her." Julius said, stepping further into the room. He'd been leaning against the wall, watching everything with such a calm disposition that I wondered where his head was.

I turned to shoot him a disgusted look for talking about killing the woman who was right there, but he didn't care. In truth, she was so consumed by the pain that I doubt she even heard him. Or cared.

James said nothing, his dark eyes following the girl's every move, the labored rise and quick fall of her chest. She was groaning in agony, her breathing labored as she fought to take the last gulps of air she would ever need. Every once in a while, when the pain reached a crescendo, she'd scream again. I'd not heard a single word escape her lips.

“I should put her out of her misery now.” Delilah bowed her head in respect toward James, who stood motionless as a statue.

His eyes found mine, and then turned back to the victim, who was screaming again. I wrapped my arms around myself, trying to keep her shrill cries from seeping into my bones, to no avail.

He nodded swiftly, and Delilah moved to the bed in an instant. Her sharp face was neutral, but I saw a hint of compassion somewhere in those hazel eyes.

“Stop!” My voice was surprisingly strong, much more so than I felt. I had been debating on whether or not to say that aloud, and wasn’t even entirely sure I was going to until it was already out in the air.

Delilah glared at me and then turned to James for approval, but he had eyes only for me. There were so many things on my mind I couldn’t even think of which to say, and so many things in his eyes I couldn’t tell what he was thinking. “Lilith?”

“Don’t kill her.” I could feel both Delilah’s and Julius’ eyes boring into me, but all I cared was that James was looking. “Please.”

“It is unfair, but instinct will dictate her actions. I can’t turn her loose.”

“So don’t.” I wasn’t sure where my brain was headed, but I let my tongue keep moving, words rolling off of it that even I didn’t expect to hear.

“What would we do with her?” His voice was soft, placating. He was trying to make me see reason or logic. We couldn’t do anything *but* kill her. “Behind these lines, she is a threat to us. And we cannot let her loose. One life isn’t worth a hundred.”

“I’ll take responsibility for her.” I said in a rush, before even considering the implications of that. “If we spare her life, we may earn her loyalty. I can help her.”

“Lilith,” James looked sad, “You can’t control her.”

“Come on, James, this is ridiculous.” Julius said, his harsh voice jarring my attention. “Kill the broad and get it over with.”

James ignored him in that impeccably stoic manner of his, and I reached for his hand. I could feel it shake so I wrapped it between mine, offering him the warmth that came from a wild vein of optimism. It was a

ridiculous hope at best, and I knew it was dangerous to even *think* this could work, but I had to try. “I can help her James. You have to trust me now.”

James watched my face a long moment, and then he nodded. “Ok.”

“Ok?” Julius snarled, wheeling around to face James as if he was insane. For agreeing with me, he probably was. “What makes you think she won’t rip your throat out the first chance she gets? Or Lilith’s... Janna’s?”

“There are two ways this can turn out, Julius.” I managed to stay calm, despite my disgust with him for being so ready and willing to kill. “She can heal, be grateful we helped her, and offer us her loyalty. Or she can decide she hates us for not killing her, try to kill us, in which case you can release her from her misery. Please, let me do this.”

Julius seethed in silence, but he knew he’d lost. I didn’t need his permission when I’d already been given the King’s. “You’re both dismissed,” James said calmly, looking from Julius to Delilah, who shook her head in disbelief. She threw her hands up and left, and Julius turned and stalked out after staring at him for a furious moment.

James crossed to the nightstand and grabbed something from the silver tray Delilah had left there. Some kind of herb, it looked like. But as he approached the woman in the bed, she screamed and thrashed out, nearly catching him with her cruel nails. I stepped closer and took the root from his hand, inching towards the bed. The woman watched me, her jaw set in a defiant line, and as I got close she made a move for me. James whipped me out of her reach before her nails could do much damage. They left a trace of blood on my arm, but I was more surprised than hurt. I shook loose of James and pressed forward.

“This will help,” I told her, fighting to keep my voice soothing rather than insistent. “I know that you don’t trust us after what just happened, but you don’t have many options.”

I took one step closer, my palm outstretched. The woman moved hesitantly, her eyes sidling from my face down to the green thing in my hand. I thought she was going to take it, but then she grabbed for me again. This time her nails pierced the delicate skin at my wrist, and James dragged me back to assess the damage. It was deep, but not even close enough to require stitches. A scratch, in the grand scheme of things. The

cup on the tray caught my eyes and I grabbed it, holding my wrist above it until a stream of my blood had pooled at the bottom, turning the silver red. I set it back on the tray with the root and watched the woman from a safe distance, James' arm slung protectively around me.

She looked savage with a tangled mess of hair, her face covered in dirt and her clothes covered in blood. And yet something in her eyes was different...solemn. James led me toward the door with a hand on the small of my back. "It's better warm." I told her in a delicate voice, glancing at the cup. Her eyes followed my gaze, and I ducked out of the room with James.

He said nothing, and I followed him to the nearest bathroom, hesitating a minute outside the door. When he began rooting through the cupboards, I ventured in. James gestured towards the countertop, producing a bottle of peroxide and a thick roll of bandages. I braced my hands against the counter and pushed myself up, allowing James to pour the peroxide down my arm. Small white bubbles beaded along the length of the cut. I stared at it a moment, trying to grasp the gravity of what I'd done, and looked up to see that James was watching me as though he had something to say.

I hefted a sigh. "There's more where that came from."

James was still quiet as he began winding the cloth around my wrist. When he was done, he ripped the end off with his teeth and tucked it underneath. It was at least an inch thick; he'd certainly taken no chances of it unraveling.

I grabbed a wash cloth from the basket by the sink and ran it under warm water. He watched me, stoic, as I wiped the blood off his chest. Thankfully, none of it was his and it only took a minute.

We walked to my room in silence, both of us too drained by what we'd witnessed to attempt small talk. "I'm not going to let her keep hurting you." James finally said after we'd stopped in front of my door. "If that happens again—"

"Xian was here." I cut him off before he could tell me that it was only a matter of time before he killed the woman whose life I'd pleaded for. "When you went out into the woods, he came to me. He said every night, he will kill one more and turn one more. Tomorrow, he will kill two and

turn two. The day after that he will kill three and turn three. And after that-”

James cut me off just by grabbing my hand and tracing a circle on my palm. I looked down and watched his finger swirl over my pale skin, tears burning my eyes. It wasn’t fair. None of it. I couldn’t let more people suffer through what I’d just witnessed. I wouldn’t. “Lilith,” James said quietly. I looked up slowly, and the tenderness he directed at me was too much. I leaned into him, resting my head against his chest.

His heart beat in my ears, a song so sweet it only made my eyes burn more. “Stay with me tonight?” I managed.

James obliged, wrapping me into his arms, my body cocooned against his on the pillow top. We stayed like that the rest of the night, together in complete silence. It may have been my imagination or an echo in the back of my mind, but I thought I could still hear her screams.

I didn't even notice James move away from me while I slept; something about it left me feeling cheated when I woke up alone.

I pulled a fresh shirt over my head and slipped into jeans before going to the cellar where we'd left the woman last night. There was someone in the hall, and when I got close enough I could see it was Desmond. He stood with his arms crossed and his eyes flitted over me casually. "Good morning. James told me you'd show up." He cracked a grin.

Desmond had a way of making you want to smile and be pleasant in return, but it didn't come naturally for me. "I want to see her." I nodded at the door he barred.

"I am not to allow anyone inside without the King. I'm sorry."

I rolled my eyes. "Is she at least still alive? Is she ok?"

"She is alive." He nodded. "The screaming stopped about four o'clock this morning. She's been resting since."

"Four o' clock?" So I hadn't imagined it. "Has James had you standing here all night?"

"I'm here on the authority of Julius. But yes, I've been here all night."

Julius. Of course. "Fine. Do you need anything? Something to eat?"

Desmond smiled. "You have a good heart. Janna has already brought me breakfast, but I thank you."

My plans thwarted, and breakfast missed, I went off in search of Janna, but she was nowhere to be found. I considered going to the library again and at least trying to find something useful in the pursuit of saving my life. But I didn't relish the idea, and then it occurred to me that Jocelyn's diary was still where I'd left it on the mahogany dresser the night before.

I considered letting it stay there untouched. I wasn't certain I wanted to know where this was headed, or whether it would make me feel better. But I did know there wasn't much that could make matters *worse*.

The pages slipped through my fingers like falling leaves; I knew the exact spot that I needed. Three quarters of the way through the journal, the pages were bloated and wrinkled from having been constantly touched. The ink smeared in random spots, webbing out like unintentional stories from each tear-stained letter. I could practically see her, dark hair hanging around her face like a curtain, tears slipping down the bridge of her nose, and dropping on the paper to tell the story she wouldn't.

I remember when I was practicing literature. Somebody somewhere once said about writing that you sit down to tell your story and you open a vein.

It never made sense before, but now that I think about it, now that I'm actually going to admit what happened, it seems astonishingly accurate. I don't want to tear open a vein. I've tormented myself enough. But I know my choices are also limited, and I've only got myself to blame for that.

My damnable pride. Everybody knows what happened—or at least, they believe they do. But I couldn't tell them the truth, much less continue to talk about it. I'm supposed to be the strong one—the queen, a picture of indomitable strength. I don't want to leech this upon my brothers, my parents, especially not Janna or Olias. The most important people to me can never know what truly happened, or else they would crumble. I will not take them down with me.

But I have no one to confide in. I never have...It's a hard thing to come by when you're entrusted with a kind of power, a responsibility so heavy that it's already oppressive. I know I need to cut myself—not physically, but mentally. I need to lay it all bare, everything, and go from there. If I ever have any hope of recovering, I need this.

I can't help wonder if my pride and my affair of the heart got me into this situation. They are both, after all, a sin. If I had gone another way that night, or not gone out at all, would the same thing still have happened? I want to say no, but I believe so. Everything has always seemed to happen for a reason—doors close so that you learn to walk away, people hurt you so that you can learn to be strong, the innocent die because...

Actually, I've never been able to justify that one.

I felt him watching me before I saw him, even before I caught the smell in the wind of rotting flesh, of whatever decaying humanity he may have claimed in a past life. It was a smell I knew in my deepest, most primal instincts, poorly concealed by an over-priced cologne.

Everything about him is so vivid. He is my most beautiful nightmare, the purveyor of my private hell. His eyes, hard and uncaring, are the things that wake me, sweating, in the middle of the night, silently screaming Olias' name, never loud enough to be heard.

He wasn't part of Arich's group. In fact, there was a good chance he was older than Arich. Something about the planes of his face, sculpted and harsh and angular, and the way that he moved with a purpose, suggested he'd been like this for centuries. And that was, perhaps, the most horrifying thing about him.

I didn't stand a chance to outrun him, and he was upon me even before I could shift, his fangs piercing into my neck with a slow, practiced control. I knew then it wasn't about his survival or an uncontrollable frenzy. It was about the way it made him feel, like a God capable of anything, leaving me paralyzed under him, too weak to move, too strong to close my eyes and imagine myself elsewhere. He wasn't a murderer—he was worse, inflicting torture upon others for some animalistic pleasure. I wish he'd killed me... that would have been easier. But that wouldn't have been nearly as fun for him; he kissed me, dropping his lips to my ear and stared straight into my eyes when he whispered to me something that gives me chills even now...his name. "Remember it." He commanded, smirking.

"Why?" I asked, because it didn't make sense that he would leave me alive when I felt so close to death, much less tell me his name.

"You're just another broken toy now, but you're my broken toy. You belong to me, and I'll not let you forget it."

The words blurred before me before I could finish the entry, like viewing them through a haze of smoke. The book tumbled from my shaking hands and closed with a harsh snap on the ground. I barely made it to the trashcan in time to vomit.

James had impeccable timing. He managed to come in just as I was retching over the trash, dry-heaving because I'd already been at this for too long. Every time I thought of him, a new wave would wash over me. "What's wrong?" James demanded, closing the distance between us in a heartbeat. In the next, he had his hands on my shoulders, his eyes full of concern.

"It was him," I managed, exhausted. I leaned my head against the wall and closed my eyes because I didn't want to see his reaction, and then opened them because I couldn't avoid it. "Xian."

James tensed visibly, his jaw clenching. "What did he do to you?" My eyes were so heavy, my mind so full. How was I supposed to explain any of this? "Lilith?" He prodded, unable to hide an undercurrent of hysteria.

But I couldn't answer him. I didn't even know the answer myself. I couldn't fathom how he still had control over me, though he repulsed me. How did he manage to still cause me anxiety, to break my heart over again, to make me scared to close my eyes? James folded himself against me, and I let myself lean against him so that we sat in an awkward tangle of limbs on the hardwood floor; I needed his strength. "You're shaking." He said, pressing his arms tighter around me. "You don't have to be afraid of him." James seemed to have read my mind. "And you don't have to tell me anything you don't want to. But I'm here for you."

I nodded against him, and we sat like that for a while, well past the point where my legs started to ache from being curled up in an unusual display of angles. I didn't know how to tell him...there might never be a good way to share this burden, but he was here offering to help ease it. That was enough. "Xian is the one." I mumbled. "He bit Jocelyn. He killed your sister."

James was silent for an impossibly long moment before I felt him stand. I was scared to look at him, to see the hurt and anger and hatred churning in him, but instead he fixed me with a look of deadly calm. "James?"

"Relax, Lilith," He pressed a gentle kiss to my forehead. My hand slipped from his as he stood. "I won't be long."

“Where are you going?” I demanded. “Don’t do anything you’re going to regret.”

“I won’t regret this.”

“James,” I tried again. He had the door shut behind him before I could even struggle to my feet. The hall was empty when I opened the door, as if he’d never been there at all.

Jocelyn’s journal in the corner haunted me; I wanted to read more, to know the events leading to the end of her story...our story... but I couldn’t keep reading. Not yet. As disgusted as I was by what I’d learned, as angry as I was at James for leaving me here, I was seething with hatred. I’d been through every possible emotion with Xian...he’d put me through the ringer even before I’d forsaken him. And still, not until that very moment did I feel such a toxic hatred for him. It swelled up inside me, turning everything black until I could almost feel myself rotting from the inside out with it.

That poison spread from one thought to another, tainting everything it could touch until I knew what needed done. I had to stop him...I just might be the only person able to get close enough to stand a chance.

James,

Please forgive me.

~~I'm sorry I didn't say goodbye.~~

~~Thank you.~~

~~I love you.~~

James still wasn't back. For all I knew, he was with Xian now. For all I knew, he was dead. They were silly things to think. In fact, all of my thoughts seemed stupid. I couldn't articulate a thing to say to him, so I wadded the paper up and decided maybe some things were better left unsaid. He would figure it out when he got back and saw the empty room.

"Lilith!" Janna's voice chased me down the hall before I'd even taken three steps out the door. "I'm happy to see you. I need to talk."

I glanced at the window, where the sun was starting to slip away. There wasn't time. I'd already waited too long in hopes of having some sort of goodbye. "I was just going for a walk." I lied. "What is it?"

"A walk sounds good." She looked around like she was expecting someone, though the house was still as usual. "Outside."

"Well..." I hesitated. "I don't have long."

"It won't take long." Janna promised. She looked nervous, and I couldn't help but wonder what was so urgent.

She was quiet the whole way downstairs, refusing to answer my questions even when I told her she was staring to worry me. As soon as the door shut behind us, I rounded on her. "Janna!" I snapped. "Tell me what's going on."

"I'm scared..." She laughed. "It's silly."

"I can't help you if you don't tell me what happened." I tried my best not to sound like her mother, but her illusory answer didn't give me a lot to go on.

She hefted a sigh. "I'm...I'm in love with my sister's boyfriend." She lifted her eyes very cautiously to mine, gauging my reaction. I could feel the guilt radiating off of her, like a red, indomitable heat that threatened to sweep me in with it.

I blinked. "Olias?"

"Of course, Olias." She moaned, covering her face with her hands. Her words were muffled when she asked, "Who else?"

I thought back to hearing her last night...her voice had seemed flirtatious then. I had not really considered it, but now it made sense.

She'd suggested that Olias might know something...that he could help us for the right price. "You can't be serious."

Janna scowled, a furrow forming between her expertly shaped eyebrows. "Don't mock me, Lilith. You're my friend. You're supposed to be supportive about this stuff."

"Yeah, well, I'm new at this friend thing."

A groan split the quiet night. Janna dropped her face into her hands, defeated; a curtain of dark hair separated her from my judgment. "Oh God. I'm done for. Julius will kill me. My *mother* will kill me. Quick, tell me it will be alright!"

I rolled my eyes, only because she couldn't see me, but she would have heard the scream I wanted to let loose. "What even led you to realize this?" I pulled her hands from her face, and she looked at me with those wide brown eyes full of fear. A single tear track marked her cheek. "I mean, are you sure that you *really* love him?"

"We've been seeing each other since the night of the funeral."

"Janna!" I couldn't bite back my shock. Nor could I keep the repulsion off my face.

"Don't you judge me, Lilith. The funeral brought back a lot of painful memories for both of us, and I don't know what happened, but we just sort of fell together."

I remembered her drinking, laughing. She'd covered her pain well. "Ok." I said. "First things first, stop crying."

"I'm not crying!" Janna straightened, wiping at her face indignantly.

"Olias should be leaving soon, right? So maybe this will sort itself out?"

Janna studied me until deciding I was serious. Then her eyes narrowed with something like disgust. "That's what you think?" She snapped. "That he will just leave and everything will go back to normal?" My silence answered for me. She laughed, an unusually harsh sound, and jumped to her feet. "I was wrong about you." The revelation was sour, proven by the twist of her lips. "All this time I thought you would change things. I thought you could change *us*. But you can't change anything,

Lilith, because you refuse to do anything to help yourself. You were running from your problems from the minute you came into James' life. I should have known... it's who you are, what you do. If something gets tough, you back down. You run away without looking back. And you always will. But the worst thing is you expect that's what other people should do too." She shook her head, and I saw another silver tear roll down her cheek. "You're pathetic!"

She turned on her heel and ran, so fast that I lost track of which way she even went. The right thing to do would be to follow her, to apologize for taking her admission so casually, to listen to what she had to say. But I couldn't move. Her words had cut me in a way I wasn't used to...they made me ache straight to the bone. No, it wasn't her words...it was the truth behind them. Even as she had tried to tell me about her worries, seeking comfort, I had been impatient, thinking of running. It was exhausting, all this running away. But it needed done, one last time.

I stood and nearly fell over when a sudden rush of wind knocked me off balance. A tell-tale chill inched along my spine, but by the time I turned, I was alone. There was only the statuesque wolves and trickling fountain. A piece of paper, folded crisply in half, lay where I'd just been sitting.

I unfolded it with trembling fingers; I knew that handwriting, the way it screamed of a practiced hand, one that had required centuries to perfect the loops and edges of a gothic style.

What's a King without his Queen? I have something that belongs to the beasts you're residing with. Coincidentally, they have you. You see where I'm going with this? If you don't want your new friends becoming orphans, you'd best make sure I get what belongs to me. Come home to me, Lilith, and I will let the old woman go. I was rather fond of that girl...she reminded me of her sister. If you don't come fetch the red-head, then the little one is next. With love,

Xian.

I read it twice and then stared at the paper.

I'd have thought he was bluffing, but for the simple fact that the queen hadn't been at dinner. My stomach sank. He'd caused their father's death, he'd killed their sister, and now he had their mother?

Xian had been here, behind me, just as he had been the night before. James was nowhere to be found. He could have killed me there or dragged me back himself. Instead, he was forcing my hand, making me play his game.

I knew my way through the maze by now. Even with panic sitting on my chest, I made it through. Alone in the woods again, my panic only grew with a spike of adrenaline. He was going to kill her. Xian was many things, each one more horrid than the next, but he wasn't a liar. His word was good, and he'd make due on his promise to kill her. The fact that he'd not given me a deadline was bad.

I ran as fast as I could. I ran toward him even more quickly than I'd run away from him, for longer than I'd have imagined possible, dodging obstacles like hanging branches and jumping over fallen logs, my mind a tangled fury of questions. I thanked the Lord or the nymphs of the forest or whoever had trod a path deep into the heart of the woods.

Where was he keeping her? How had he gotten her in the first place? How could my father let this happen? Each question led me to another one, and the answers were nowhere to be found so I shut down. I pushed myself until my legs felt like jelly and my vision blurred. I pushed myself even when I felt I would collapse, when I was sure my lungs would burst, and in spite of the heaving of my chest. I ran until I felt nothing... until I wasn't even sure I was still alive.

My feet got twisted up in the roots of an old tree and I fell. Pain blossomed through me as the wind was knocked out of me.

I'm still alive.

But was the queen? I stared at the sky, trying to see through the canopy of leaves at the top, the corners of my vision turning black. I could feel something warm and wet trickle down my arm, but the pounding in my head made it seem irrelevant.

Dazed, I lay there, staring into the abyss of night.

Get up.

It would be so easy to lay there, to look at the darkness of night until it was indistinguishable from the darkness of my own mind. I could just forget the world all together...its ugly cruelty, its evil and its pain.

There was something moving in the trees nearby. I considered staying there, but I could feel someone was close. I jumped to my feet to see a young woman. When she noticed my presence she stopped as though barred from taking another step, staring at me with a wild expression. Her dark hair clung to her glossy lips. She opened her mouth to speak, but the language that came out was a far cry from English, and her haste made her tongue thick. I took a step closer, trying to catch onto whatever she was saying.

A twig snapped and the woman bristled like it was a gunshot. Xian's teeth sank into her neck, blood dripping onto the white satin of her dress. She sagged against him, the life fleeing her svelte body. "Stop!" I yelled, trying to steal his attention. Without moving, he turned his eyes upon me, and against the stranger's pale neck, his lips quirked into a smile. "Xian, stop!" I yelled. "I'm here! I'm coming back!"

He pulled away and gave the girl a gentle tap on the shoulder that sent her onto the ground in an immobile heap. He smiled, licking his lips. "Got my letter, did you love?"

"I'm here." I panted, still breathless. "I'm coming back."

"Lovely. Celebrate with a drink?" His eyes flickered to the body on the ground suggestively. I shuddered.

"You don't have to hurt anyone else." I pleaded.

"She's already hurt. A bit more won't kill her. Go ahead."

"No." I shook my head. "Let's go home. I'm tired."

"Oh, come now, Lili, you can't tell me you don't want it. Just a little taste...it's been so long..."

"No."

"One sip and all your problems will disappear." The appeal of that statement was obviously false. I didn't understand what he wanted. I'd come back to him, just like he wanted. Was he going to make me send the rest of my short life paying for it?

I stared at him in unabashed disdain. "Alright, then." He closed the space between us and grabbed my hand, lifted my wrist to his lips, and bit.

I couldn't help but cry out...It wasn't the first thing I'd expected. He grinned when our eyes connected and then dragged me toward the

woman on the ground. I stumbled and landed on my knees in a pathetic heap. “Drink.” He commanded.

I shook my head. “Come on. You need it. You *deserve* it.”

“I said *no*.” My voice bore the edge of steel, but Xian was unperturbed by that.

“Your choice.” He knelt down, swept the girl into his arms, and found her neck again. She groaned in pain, but didn’t have any energy to swat him away. Mere seconds later he pulled away, grabbed my wrist, and pressed it to her mouth. When I realized his intent I tried to move away, but he pulled me in, squeezing my wrist tighter to allow my blood to drip onto her lips. A small sound escaped her, a curious mix of pain and pleasure, and he released me. I scrambled to my feet in horror, staring at the corpse-like figure in his arms. Any moment she would open her eyes and—

Her eyes flew open as the thought crossed my mind, and she took in her surroundings before sitting up. Her tongue flicked out over her lips, hungrily sopping up the traces of my blood. “Welcome back,” Xian said, pushing her away from him with a crooked smile. He grabbed me again and trudged forward, confident in his direction. The girl sat there on the ground, still, looking at her hands as if they’d changed. Her eyes locked on mine, desperate and hungry, but she stayed there still, too weak to move.

My mind was a maelstrom of thoughts: terror and disgust and sorrow. I didn’t even pay any attention to the path we took. I only knew that we arrived at the gates in a matter of minutes, and I kept on with him despite my spinning head. When the door shut, something clicked and I rounded on him. “What have you done with Calista?” I demanded. My fury took precedence over everything else.

“She’s resting.” He replied coolly. “Safe.”

“I want to see her.”

“Of course you do.” He looked amused. “But first, I think there’s someone else you should see.”

Xian led me past the staircase. My heart turned to stone.

He was taking me to my father’s room. My father, who had publicly disowned me, refusing to negotiate on my behalf. It was the reason Xian was free to torment me as he had the past few weeks; my Father no longer

cared what happened to me. But had his apathy turned to hatred? What would he do to me? Would he kill me or worse?

Xian pushed open the door. I expected to see my father standing there with his back toward me, too ashamed to even look in my general direction. But he wasn't there. I looked all around the seemingly empty room. I'd never been here before. The irony hit me that perhaps that was because this was where you went to die. "Go on," Xian prodded. He leaned casually against the door frame, one leg swung in front of the other, his arms crossed. "He's here somewhere."

I glared at him, but stepped further into the cavernous chamber, looking around. There was something strange going on. I couldn't quite determine what. I took another cautious step, but nothing happened. I turned to tell Xian that the room was empty when I saw it, the hand sticking out from under the bed. My breath hitched in my chest, but I edged forward with a mounting sense of dread.

I knew, from the first moment I saw that hand, what I would find. But knowing what to expect did not help keep back the scream when I saw it. My father's body on the floor face down, a carved wooden stake protruding from his back.

"He didn't care about you, Lilith." Xian whispered in my ear. He had sneaked up behind me in an instant, and now his hand was on my shoulder, with just a little too much pressure. He wasn't comforting me. He was reminding me that even now, after I'd run away and been driven back, I belonged to him. "He didn't want you back. I hope you understand...I had to do it."

I stared, transfixed, at my father's corpse. After everything we'd been through, with our unconventional relationship, I expected that his death wouldn't have bothered me. But it was something I'd never expected; He was going to live forever. It was me who was finite, *me* who would one day cease to exist. I didn't doubt my father wouldn't mourn that loss. And yet, seeing him stabbed in the back by the only person he had ever trusted...I felt unseasonably sad.

My chest seized, my throat constricting around this inexplicable grief. "You're sick." It was all I could manage without my voice breaking. That was a satisfaction I'd not give him.

“Oh, come now. You know how horrid he was. He’s the reason you ran away...” Xian rested his chin on my shoulder, letting his arms circle me. “He’s the reason you left me. It’s no great loss.” I choked on a dry sob. “A man who doesn’t care for his own daughter is hardly a man at all.”

I wanted to cry. Being here, back where I’d started as if nothing had changed, was just too much. It was like everything I’d fought for, everything I’d done, the people I’d met, and the person I’d become had never happened. I’d tried and failed. That shouldn’t make me feel so desperately hopeless, but it did. Because I’d known love, and I’d had a friend. Now they were gone and all I had was the memory of them. Now all I had was Xian. I wanted to cry, but I didn’t want him to see me do it. “Calista.” I demanded.

“Of course.” He disentangled himself from me. “Come with me.”

But I could only stare, transfixed, at where my father lay on the ground in a pool of his own dark, poisonous blood. Xian smirked, just the slightest bit, before turning his back on me. I knew what he was doing...he was giving me a moment alone, to finish what wasn’t, to say the things that had been left unsaid, to pay my respects. I didn’t know if I had any respect for him, alive or dead. There was *something*, an inexplicable sort of emotion that had been the foundation of our entire relationship...I’d never been able to figure out what exactly that was. “You were never really much of a father.” I said, bending down to be closer to him. I knew he couldn’t hear me, but Xian could. “I always thought maybe that’s what love was... just guarded and distant.” I pulled the stake from his back, slowly regaining inch by inch of the blood-soaked weapon. I slid it up my sleeve in one discreet, fluid motion. “But I don’t think you knew what that was either.”

I cast one last glance at my father, disgusted, cold, and numb, before following Xian out into the foyer. He held out a hand, but I pressed my arms around myself, trying to fight off the hollow feeling that threatened to steal what tattered fragments were left of my resolve. I followed him up the steps, around the corner, and then I knew where we were going...my room.

I recognized the man who stood guard at my door, his arms crossed and his expression bored. His name was Evan, and he’d been less than cruel. I’d actually sort of seen him as a peaceable man. Now he straightened when he saw Xian and then grinned at me. There seemed to be something on his lips, something he couldn’t wait to say, but a second

glance at Xian gave him pause to think better of it. There was a new addition to the door—a shiny brass padlock, which Xian opened with a key procured from his pocket. When it swung open, I was almost too scared to enter. I let go of my fear when I saw her huddled in the corner.

“Lilith?” Her voice was still strong, imperial. She was a queen by marriage, but she possessed a queen’s charming dignity by birth. I ran to her side and fell to my knees to assess the damage.

“I’m so sorry!” I hoped she could see my sincerity in the dimly lit room. “I never meant for this to happen.”

“What happened?” She grabbed me by the upper arms in desperation and looked me over, casting a harried glance over my shoulder. “James? My children?” There was a hard edge of desperation in her voice.

“They’re safe.” I promised. “I left them safe.”

At that information, her eyes widened. I noticed the gash across her cheek, the dried blood that was so dark and harsh against her delicate skin. “You left them?”

“It’s ok.” I soothed. “You’re free now. He won’t hurt you.” I stood and offered her my hand.

“You shouldn’t have come.” Despite her protests, she allowed me to help her up. Her eyes swam with tears.

“It’s ok.” I smiled. “Everything is alright.”

“No,” She shook her head. “You should have stayed. They need you.”

“They need their mother,” I grabbed her hands in earnest. I wanted her to go before Xian changed his mind. “James needs you.”

“I’ve had him for twenty two years.” She straightened, collecting her dignity again. Her tangled red curls spilled down her back in a wave as she moved. “It’s your turn.”

“I belong here,” I attempted to convince myself, but the words sounded strange—contrived. I couldn’t make *myself* believe the lie, let alone her.

“You belong where you are loved, where you are needed. I’m sorry it’s taken me so long to figure out what they see in you. But I see it now, Lilith. You will make a great queen...maybe even a better one than I.”

My mind reeled in a desperate attempt to understand the progression of our conversation. She was a fighter; she was supposed to be picking up the pieces and running back to her family. “Please,” I swallowed back more tears; they made my voice thick and desperate. “Please go now... and tell them how much I love them.”

“I would say the very same,” She smiled. It was a look I’d not yet seen on her; a wry, intuitive little shape that seemed to transcend the gravity of that moment. “A queen must make sacrifices, Lilith. You’ve already made yours. This is mine.”

Calista turned away from me and after only a second, walked calmly toward Xian. I watched her, mind churning wildly, and then turned eyes on him. “Xian,” I warned. “Don’t hurt her!”

Xian kept his eyes locked on mine while she drew closer and closer to him, until finally she stopped just a few steps away, her shoulders squared. Calista bowed her head just the tiniest bit, and then moved quick as a whip.

Xian turned just as she raised the stake. I hadn’t even realized she’d taken it from me, quick as a thief. Now she was prepared to shove it between his ribs. I’d taken the stake with every intention of using it, but she had the conviction I lacked. She meant to drive it into his heart. He reacted so quickly, I barely even saw her move before he threw her to the ground in front of me. The stake clattered to the floor just after her. Xian stepped forward, hatred searing in his eyes.

I put a hand on his chest in an effort to stop him. “Leave her alone.” I begged, trying to put some space between them.

Xian threw me across the room with a simple flick of his arm. I hit the wall. ‘Don’t hurt her!’ I gasped through the pain blossoming through my ribcage. Calista was already on her feet, facing him head on. “You promised!”

“And you betrayed me!”

“He’d never let me leave this place alive.” Calista’s voice was calm. “Run, Lilith.”

Run. Is that all they thought I could do?

I struggled to my feet to stop him, but Xian moved more quickly, eliminating the space between them. He looked at her and she looked at

him with unparalleled hatred. Xian glanced up at me from under sooty lashes—it was an expression I'd seen on him dozens of times. *I didn't want to hurt you*, he would say, *but it was the only way to make you understand.*

Xian moved with a violent speed. Though I screamed again, Calista did not move a muscle, or show the slightest indication that she'd even been bitten. But the proof was there, a tide of red gushing out of her neck. Xian pulled away and looked at her mildly. "I bit your daughter. I killed her." He let that sink in for a moment before adding, "I must say... she was sweeter." The queen stood, unspeaking and unflinching, but the look in her eyes spoke volumes. Xian looked at me, the blood tinting his lips a ridiculous shade of red. He looked manic, unstable, as he leaned into her and whispered something in Calista's ear. I didn't hear it; I'm not sure I would have wanted to.

Whatever it was, it got the reaction he wanted. She lunged at him, a scream ripping from her throat, while he stood with a satisfied smirk. He watched her throw herself at him for a moment, and then moved so quickly that I almost missed it.

The crack of Calista's neck was sickening, the kind of sound that makes vomit rise to the back of your throat and stops your heart from beating. She fell to the ground in slow motion, dead before she could even touch the tile, her fall burdened by my horror.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

My heart flooded with grief, my eyes with tears, and my mouth with the vilest string of profanity I'd ever imagined. And yet, my mind fell blank. Words, the only constant I had ever known, decided to fail me. Except, it was not so much that the words failed me as I failed words. My brain screeched to a halt, refusing to accept anything as it reeled over what I knew to be truth. Calista was dead. The mother of the man I may love... Dead at the hands of the man who claimed he loved me.

A million thoughts pulsed through my mind, a million words twisting, dancing, and leaping out of my reach. I hurt, and at the same time I was numb.

"They die, Lilith." Xian wiped his hands on his pants, like her blood repulsed him. "It's natural."

"Not by our hands." I shook my head in denial. I had been deceived, Xian's promise broken. It should not have surprised me, and yet the shock paralyzed my body and brain. "Not by yours!"

"If not mine, than by disease or illness. I did her a favor." His lips were bent into a smirk; he was mocking me. But his eyes—he truly believed in the validity of that claim. "Aging is a pitiful thing, and takes *so* long. I don't even think she suffered...much."

His words triggered me. No longer numb, I lunged at him, trembling with rage. I had nothing to attack him with, but in my blind fury, my bare hands seemed good as anything. A wild cry escaped my lips. Always one step ahead of me, he anticipated my move, grabbed my wrists and immobilized me. Evan inched closer, looking rapidly between us, uncomfortable.

Xian, however, was relatively unperturbed by my murder attempt. That infuriatingly calm smile was still perfectly in place. Sometimes he reminded me of a puppet, his face forever painted into a self-satisfied smirk. I could smell him; clean and cold, like mint. It made my heart squeeze into a knot. "I know now Lilith, what it will take to keep you with me forever."

"Nothing," I struggled to wrench out of his grip, but it was no good. "Nothing you could ever do will make me stay! Not after this."

"I can keep you here as long as I desire you," He whispered it just close enough to my ear to make me shudder. "Locked away until you come to your senses and realize I am what is best for you."

"I'll take my own life!" I said vehemently. I said it out of desperation, but a small part of me meant it. Despite having spent the past several weeks trying to deny the possibility of taking my own life, it was a fate I'd welcome over the one he was offering.

"Not if you can't die. Not if you're immortal."

"Impossible." I spat, turning my head away from him. Looking at him was turning my stomach.

"I can do it, Lilith." He grabbed my chin, forcing me to look at him again. "And I would do it, for you."

"If you do, I will kill you."

Xian blinked at my threat. "Then you will soon follow and we will spend eternity in Hell together. What is the point, when we could spend it here, *alive*?"

"Neither of us are alive." I shook my head and swallowed back tears.

"It's subjective." He waved a hand as if he could dismiss my foolish arguments all together. "Besides, your heart still beats...for now."

"Not much longer!" My rage was resurfacing. I was cycling drastically through the stages of grief: denial, anger, and sadness all sweeping through me in waves. I made a desperate jump at him, but Evan grabbed my arms and pinned them back without even any direction from Xian. I struggled against him, desperate. I would claw him, bite him, pull his hair... Anything, as long as I got to lay a hand on him. Anything to make him hurt even a fraction as much as he'd hurt me.

"No," Xian turned his back on me. My fight was futile, but I still struggled to get free until Xian was at the door. He turned, and I refusing to take my eyes from his face. I saw the words form on his lips rather than hear them over the fury of adrenaline coursing in my veins. "Not much longer indeed."

Evan pushed me away from him, leaving me at arms' length, and watched me warily for a moment. He almost said whatever he'd been thinking before leaving. Instead, he looked at the body of the queen on the floor. My eyes followed his, and I couldn't help stare at her. He shut the door, the scrape of a lock affirming my solitude. My captivity had been renewed. I could feel my lip quivering, but I wasn't ready to let the tears out yet. In that moment, I was alight with hatred, every nerve quaking with a fury I would no longer be hostage to.

I lay on the ground, letting these feelings transform me. I'd been hurt. I'd felt the pain of broken bones, the sting of a well-aimed right hook, the agony of teeth tearing through the most tender of flesh. I'd been angry. I'd known the way that rage can make you a different person, like you're standing on the opposite side of the mirror, watching someone ugly and cruel tear the world apart. But never had I felt this...it was a feeling I couldn't even attribute a name to. I only knew that I felt myself floating away, becoming ever more distant. And as I watched my meek self slip away, I wished her farewell.

Evan opened the door later, but I didn't know how much time had passed. It could have been minutes; it was more likely hours. I stared at him from where I sat against the wall, my knees hiked against my chest. A second man moved into the room. He collected Calista's body wordlessly, cradling her weight as if it were insubstantial, and left. Evan sighed before shutting me in again.

I'd been sitting on the cold, unrelenting ground long enough that it had put a chill into my bones that even the intensity of my fury couldn't thaw. It made me ache so that finally I had to gather myself and stand. And when I did, I felt lighter, the old pieces of me falling away.

The attic room was almost exactly as I had left it. Only one thing I noticed was different—it was darker. I strode to the window and pulled back the thick curtains. A sheet of plywood crossed over my window, at least a quarter-inch thick. It effectively blockaded any light from entering the room: not the sun or the moon.

I drew in a deep breath and slammed into the wood as forcefully as I could, using my shoulder to hit it in the middle. Nothing happened, other than probably the beginning of a wicked bruise. But the resilience made me feel all the more trapped, all the more helpless. I slammed at the boards with all my might, until finally I had scraped the skin clear off some parts of my arms and gashes of skin were surely ripping away. Only then did I stop long enough to look around the room for something to pry that damned plywood away.

Was it too much to be allowed to see outside? It wasn't like I was going to break the glass of my window and shimmy four stories down to the ground...It actually wasn't a bad idea, but it didn't help much. What good would it be to escape when I'd been the one to willingly walk through those doors? If I ran, he would only continue with his original plan and this would have been for nothing. Still, the dark seemed to breed my poisonous feelings.

I crossed to the desk on memory and found a candle there, just where I'd left it. The scent of lavender seemed cloying now. I pulled the drawer open so fast it came free of the track, and dumped the contents on the bed. My fingers found purchase around the matchbook. There were

two matches left, not very promising, but it provided me with a little bit of light once I fed the flame to the candle.

Other than the boards, nothing had changed. It was like a tomb...my tomb. A cold realization trickled down my back as it struck me that I had been born in this house, and I would die in this house. The fact that I'd escaped for even a few weeks was miraculous. But it didn't make me feel any better.

The only thing that did make me feel better was the flicker of an idea.

I considered setting fire to the boards, but the boards would not be the only thing to catch fire. The curtains, the draperies, even the walls would borrow the flame...not that I was at all opposed to the house burning down. The flames wouldn't feel to Xian like anything other than a brush of wind as he ran to safety. Yes, the idea of lighting this match and letting it take on a life of its own was intoxicating, but if I wanted any good to come of it, I would have to trap Xian first.

Using the candle as a guide, I picked my way through the room and opened up my closet to see all of the things that had been meant to buy my love... no, not my love. My compliance, my ignorance maybe, but not my love. Tailored dresses for when father chose to entertain, crisp tops and, though I rarely left the home, expensive coats. There were enough shoes to provide half of Africa, and several skirts by obscure Italian designers. Father sought to buy the love of all his children.

I did love my custom dresses and patent leather pumps as much as the next girl, but if father had really wanted to help, he should've bought me archery or fencing lessons. Of course, they'd never have appealed to me, and they wouldn't have done much good against Xian. A sword, even, would have been a more useful gift, though even now I didn't think I'd be able to kill him.

It shouldn't have given it a second thought, and it wasn't even likely, but if it came down to it, could I kill Xian? I'd never been one for violence, and even as much as I hated him, I didn't think that I could do something so...barbaric. I wished it was simple to kill him, just a gun shot or a knife to the throat...but even as the impossible thought crossed my mind, I knew I wouldn't be able to do it. To end a life, even one that was undead, just wouldn't sit well with me.

Then again, I would only have to live with myself for a little while after. I was going to Hell, undeniably. Killing him would actually probably be a good thing, compared to what he'd done, what he would continue to do if he lived. Maybe killing him would land us in different circles of Hell. Unless the experience was personalized, tailored to an individual's fears and torments, in which case I'd be stuck with him in my own private eternal torture. Either way, I didn't seem to be in a good position to make any of those decisions.

I was pretty convinced that I couldn't do it...not because I'd once cared for him, but because his life was not mine to take. But then I thought about heaven. I wondered if it was personalized, too. Because the only thing I knew that I wanted, what I wanted more than anything ever, was to spend more time with James. It wasn't possible, obviously, but even thinking about it made me consider trying for redemption.

I thought of the man I loved, even though I'd known him for way too short a time. Even though that love went against everything either of us knew. Even though it was entirely unprecedented, unfounded, and utterly stupid of us.

When I'd fallen for Xian, I'd have sworn I knew what love was. That feeling of being special, being beautiful, being everything to someone. After a year of flirting with disaster, after I'd severed those ties and pushed Xian out of my head and my life, I had only learned what love was not. It wasn't about your heart speeding up when you saw them, or people validating your relationship with their approval. It was not about gifts or showing affection or possession.

There was something to be said of my worldly knowledge that it took to realize what exactly love was. Not the way that somebody else made you feel about yourself, but the way that they made you feel about them. Sure, having someone look at you like you were the creator of the world, like they would kill for you, was an enticing part of it. But the deeper, much more significant part was knowing that you would do the same for them... anything, really. I'd foolishly told Xian I would have done anything for him, but I didn't understand then just how much you could do for someone you loved. And I loved James.

Though I'd always known the versatility of love, it was really only starting to hit me that there were different kinds. The love that binds

families, which existed outside of the story-books, which I'd never been able to trust. It was real. Thinking back to Julius and his devil-may-care attitude, things made a little more sense. He wasn't just crazy because he'd lost half of himself and he chose to take it out on the world. Sure, Julius was the furthest into the deep end, but they had all loved their sister. It was clear in everything they did, from James' devotion to his people to Janna's obsession with remaining true to her father's expectations. The queen even, and her very obvious devotion to her children, the way she had stepped up in their defense, the way she'd thrown down her life for them...for me, as an extension of their happiness.

But of all the kinds of love I could think of, it was the love of friendship that puzzled me most. Most romantic relationships, as far as I knew, started with a friendship, yet mine had blossomed from nowhere apparently. And then here was this girl who accepted the love I had for her brother, who seemed to know everything about me. I'd never had a true friend, I suppose, so I could have been off base, but something about her told me that maybe she loved my presence. It was a presumptuous part of me that thought that, but if that's what it was, then maybe the love of friendship was a gateway. With James, it would have been a gateway into true love: the undying, scorching hot passion of two souls who found each other without deal-breaking flaws. With Janna, that gateway would be into the love of a family. Though I had countless 'brothers' and 'sisters', Janna felt to me something more than a friend. Friends didn't throw their lives down for each other, but family did. Just as irrational as my love for James, Janna was more of a sister to me than anybody ever could be.

Thinking of how Xian had hurt them all, looking at the spot where Calista's lifeless body had been, it became clear to me. It wasn't a matter of *if* I could kill him. It was a matter of *how*.

I'd given in and collapsed onto my floor against the wall, thinking of how to end it all. The one candle in my room didn't offer me much light, so when he entered, I had to squint through the darkness to even make him out. But of course it was him. Who else would it have been?

Even if there had been any doubt of his identity, it was chased away when he opened his mouth. "Are you feeling better?"

I'd expected him to come back. I'd planned for this. Xian's face came into view when he stepped forward again. The candlelight danced off the planes of his face softly...deceptively so. He almost didn't look like the monster that he'd proven himself to be. But looks were deceiving. I doubted I looked as determined as I felt. I'd returned to my assault on the wall, periodically throwing myself into the wood, sapping all my strength. A sheen of sweat covered me, sending hot and cold sensations coursing over my skin.

"Leave me alone." My voice cracked.

Xian didn't respond, rather took another step forward so that he towered above me, and then dropped to the floor beside me. The new angle only made him look that much more harmless, but I tensed my muscles and scooted away from him in protest. My head felt heavy on my shoulders.

"You don't look well."

"I'm dying." I snapped. "You'll have to forgive me."

"I can end it." He grabbed my hand. "This suffering can stop in a heartbeat."

"No." I wiped sweat off my forehead, took a rattling breath, and flicked my tongue over chapped lips.

"You're dying. The werewolves mark is killing you."

"It's not that. I just...I'm starving."

He raised his eyebrows in an attempt to look passive, but he could see the opportunity. "I get the feeling you want something more than a grilled cheese?"

"Blood. It's the only reason I'm still alive." I lied. "I'm an addict, but it keeps me going." I let my eyes flutter closed. "I know what you're thinking, but you're wrong. I'm nothing like you. I won't kill for it."

That made him laugh. "You're more like me then you'll ever know." He placed the back of his hand against my cheek; I shrugged away. "You're burning up, exhausting your blood supply for energy. You need to drink."

"I'm not like you." I protested.

"You could be." His voice rippled with excitement. "I can save you right now, but I won't do it if you refuse to admit what you are. I can't have

you running around wild, like an unbroken horse.”

“I won’t.”

He shook his head. “You have to admit what you are. You have to surrender to me, or I can’t help you.” He let those words roll over me and then brushed a hair off my face. “It would be too dangerous for you otherwise.”

I was silent, contemplating his words, when he stood to go. I grabbed his hand between mine, allowing the desperation to eke out of my voice. “Please... please if you care about me at all, you won’t do this to me.”

He shook me loose and moved to the door before turning around. “I don’t think you understand, Lilith,” He said calmly, “how important you are to me.”

“You don’t love me!” I screamed. “You never did!” He didn’t contest it. “What am I still here for?”

Xian smiled, his lips peeling back to reveal a perfect row of white teeth. The sight of his fangs sent a shiver down my spine as I remembered his earlier sentiment about trying to change me.

“Me.”

He slammed the door behind him. The candle flickered, its light fading, burning bright one last moment, before it went out.

Evan wavered over me when I opened my eyes later. He offered me a hand and hoisted me up. When he released me, I wobbled, letting the wall hold me up. I blinked at him, letting my eyes adjust, and looked past him. “I want to see Xian.”

“Are you sure?” He was obviously hesitant.

I swallowed, trying to soothe my dry throat. “I don’t want to die.” My voice was barely more than a whisper, the best I could manage.

Evan nodded and looped his arm through mine. I allowed myself to lean on him more than was necessary. “I’m not sure he’s back yet, but I don’t think he’d mind you waiting in his room.”

“Back?” I asked. “Back from where?”

“I...” His voice faltered. “I’m not sure.”

As we passed through the hall, I began to get a sense of things. First, the silence. I looked to Evan slowly, trying not to betray the glimmer of hope that lit up in me. “It’s night time already?”

“Just about.” He confirmed, without much of a second thought. He glanced at the watch on his wrist and licked his lips nervously.

I took a shaky breath, hoping that would disguise the increased rate of my heart. The sun would be up soon. This was a lucky break. But Evan was behaving suspiciously. Here I was trying to shuffle Xian into a trap of my own making, but he very well may have been planning the same thing. I tried not to imagine that. If he was, the worst he could do was keep me from accomplishing what I’d set out to do. And if he did, at least I wouldn’t have to live knowing that I’d failed.

We had almost reached the staircase when Xian called out my name from behind us. We stopped, and I turned, hoping I looked desperate and weak; it wasn’t such a stretch. Xian’s face was impassive, but there was something like excitement brewing up storm clouds in his eyes. “Lilith?”

“She’s had a change of heart,” Evan bowed his head as though looking at Xian at the same time as speaking to him was simply too intimidating. “You said to let you know when she broke...”

Xian didn’t remove his eyes from me as he came to take my hand, “Yes,” He smirked. “Thank you.”

Recognizing his dismissal, Evan nodded and backed away, leaving me alone with Xian. Our proximity was unnerving, but I fought to maintain some sort of composure. “You were looking for me?”

“I’ve had a while to think,” I said slowly, “and each day I get closer and closer to dying. I’m scared.” My breath hitched in my chest, caught somewhere in my lungs. “I don’t want to die, Xian.”

His expression was almost tender. “You don’t need to fear anything, Lilith. I can turn you.”

“We’ve tried so many times before. What if it doesn’t work?”

He cupped the sides of my face, framing it in his cold hands. “I’m sure of this.”

I shook my head, not willing to believe it. Xian drew me closer to him, and I heaved a sigh against his chest. A svelte finger tipped my chin upwards, so that we could see eye-to-eye. “Trust me.” His voice was feather light.

I allowed myself a few moments of doubt to consider why I shouldn’t trust him—he’d literally stabbed my father in the back, he’d murdered Calista, and butchered innocent humans. That was only the tip of the iceberg and yet, he could offer me salvation… I nodded.

Xian smiled and moved toward the steps, bringing me alongside him. “Everything is going to be ok, Lilith. Finally, everything is going to work out.”

I smiled, suppressing my doubts, and continued down the steps. I didn’t flinch when his arm snaked around my waist.

I curled my fingers up against my wrist, reaching for the small box I found there, a source of comfort. The book of matches burned against my skin, desperate for me to use them. I forced myself to stand a little straighter, and Xian turned, stopping on the steps all together. I drew in a breath, feeling transparent, like he could see my thoughts. His eyes stared into mine, his grip on my wrists just a bit too firm for me to be comfortable.

“You need a drink.” He mused.

“Yes,” I said, grateful. Aside from the champagne I’d been plied with at the funeral, I hadn’t drank in a while. But my nerves were on overload, and maybe taking the edge off was exactly the thing to do.

“I’ve got the perfect thing for you,” He grinned, turning towards my father’s room.

He’d wasted no time in making the place his, different even than what I’d seen when he’d brought me here before. The cavernous, formerly-barren room was now made lavish with a couch in the far corner, set before a bear-skin rug. Art decorated the walls—paintings that I had read about by Rembrandt and Gericault and even some that I didn’t recognize. A bed that was easily three times the size of my father’s took up the middle of the chamber, a heavy red bedspread tucked perfectly at the corners and topped with a mountain of pillows. Bookshelves lined the long wall, each perfectly covered in countless books.

I sat down and watched as Xian lit a few candles on his bedside stand, the glow illuminating the far reaches of the room. He gestured for me to sit down on the bed, and I did so tentatively, unable to keep from fidgeting despite already having come to terms with what I was about to do.

Xian retrieved a bottle from the table in the corner along with two short, crystal glasses. He set them on the stand next to his bed and handed the first to me as he poured another. I sniffed it tentatively. The alcoholic tinge made my eyes burn, but I closed them and swigged it down; It would make what I was about to do easier. Xian looked pleased when I set it down, and immediately poured me another. I stared into the amber liquid, watching it swirl around the bottom of the glass.

He sat next to me, placing a heavy hand on my thigh. I resisted the impulse to push him away and turned to face him instead. It was time to put my acting skills to the test. “I know now, that I can’t exist without you.” My words were true. The intentions behind them were not. But Xian didn’t have to know that. “I ran away to escape my Father’s tyranny, and that required me to leave you behind. But the whole time I was gone, you haunted me.”

Xian stood. “Oh?” His lips were pursed together in an attempt to tame the smile spreading across his face. And just like that, there it was. The charm he could turn on and off like a light switch, manufactured to conceal the darkness within him. I’d fallen for it time and again; he was counting on history to repeat itself.

I stood up and clasped his hands, pulling myself up so that he could look into my eyes. I prayed he couldn't see my deceit in them. "We had something once, and it was *tragically* beautiful." I looked down. Even after all we'd been through, we'd never spoken this candidly. I'd been too afraid of what he might do. Now, I was finally telling him the truth, and even then he didn't get it because he would hear it the way he wanted to hear it.

"All you have to do is ask." He said the words slowly, his lips moving inches from mine. I smiled, because I would not ask if my life depended on it, which it kind of did. He stood still, waiting for me to close the gap.

To kill Xian, I had to catch him off guard. I had already come to terms with the realization that I would do whatever it took to get rid of him, no matter the cost.

I hesitated, but he did not. He pressed into me enthusiastically, so that personal space was practically non-existent. He was tempting me, testing me. If I didn't make the first move, he would know. I hated myself, maybe even as much as I hated him, for what I was about to do. But I wouldn't have to suffer with it for long. I closed the space between us, letting our lips meet again. They fell into a familiar pattern, the intensity picking up rapidly. We'd been together so long...we'd done this so many times that our bodies fell in sync.

I saw the soft candle glow from the corner of my eye, and jerked him even closer, taking a few steps back. He followed, moving towards me like a magnet, and I jumped on him. Though surprised, he moved quickly enough to catch me, wrapping my legs around him so that I couldn't slip. He set me on the edge of the nightstand, moving with such zeal it almost reminded me of a young boy, getting the thing he'd been pining after.

I kissed him back, each second seeming to turn into a minute, and each minute turning to what felt like an hour. I knew that in reality it was nowhere near that long. My skin crawled, eager to be free of his touch, but I forced myself to remain still until his lips moved from mine, trailing slowly towards my neck. I hadn't planned it out past the distraction, and now I was stuck here as he moved to my weak spot, the one area that would shut me down. *Breathe*, I reminded myself. But his lips were on my neck now, his teeth grazing over the scars that he'd left there in the past, a

permanent reminder of the twisted relationship I'd thought was acceptable. But it wasn't. This wasn't.

Suddenly it was like none of the past year had ever happened, like I was the same foolish girl who thought that *maybe* he wouldn't hurt me again, that this time would be different. His fangs twitched against my skin, the temptation swelling throughout him.

A small gasp escaped me and I threw my arm back, found the candle, and slid it off the stand. It wasn't how I'd expected to do it, but I couldn't let this go on any further. Xian jumped at the sound, tearing away from me to look at the spot on the ground where the wax was already beginning to pool. The flame had landed on the bottom edge of the burgundy bed skirt, and began to pour over it, spreading quickly up the side. I jumped up, grabbed my untouched glass from behind me, and smashed it against the burning ground. The flames leapt up, forking quickly in opposite directions. I looked up just in time to make eye contact with Xian. He stood motionless for just a moment, and then he found the betrayal in my eyes.

"Lilith?" He hissed. I turned, running for the door, but he caught my arm and dragged me back, the force of which sent me to the floor. I backed away from him, the angry glint in his eyes enough to send me running. But I had him where I wanted him, I just needed him to come closer. And he did, towering over me with an incredulous sort of fury. "What were you trying to do?" He sneered. "I didn't have you pegged as the type of girl to use sex as a weapon. Did you learn that from your new friend?" He laughed, just a short sound that turned into a deep chorus of laughter when he decided he'd just amused himself. "You want me to burn?"

He blocked my way to the door, and the fire was spreading more quickly still over the bed, devouring whatever it could. The fire would kill him, but it would take me with it. I could already feel the sheen of sweat creeping up on my skin; the heat was almost unbearable. I made a move for the door, but Xian side-stepped, holding out his hand. I stared at him a moment, before making the decision that he'd never touch me again. I dove for the bed, aiming to toss myself right into the heart of the flames.

He grabbed me by the shoulder and braced me a few inches away from him so that he could, apparently, try and figure out when I'd gone

insane or suicidal. I expected him to punch me, to move his hand across the back of my face. I didn't expect him to drive me against the wall, moving with me so that his body pinned mine in place. He stared at me another moment, the unbridled fury searing in his eyes, and then pushed my chin up with the palm of his hand. A split second was all it would take to snap my neck, to behead me, and that's what I expected. But he didn't. Instead, he moved his mouth to my neck like a hungry predator, and tore into my skin. I cried out in agony, but stood motionless, my body paralyzed with the surprise attack. I summoned Calista's strength, the image of her standing stolid and unmoving even as he killed her.

My lungs ached and burned with the fire, the acrid black smoke that poured into them, and the scream that managed to escape from the back of my throat. *Face death with dignity*, I reminded myself. But the agony continued for longer than I'd have thought possible; this was endless. Death wasn't coming.

I pushed at his shoulders in an attempt to dislodge him, to get a little room for leverage. But it wasn't successful in the least; he leaned into me harder, his weight crushing my chest, grinding my skull against the wall. I couldn't move my head to see, so I whipped my arms around madly, hoping to disengage him, or at the very least get in a jab to the nose. Instead, my fingers found purchase. The bottle of alcohol, just a little bit out of reach.

By some miracle, I was able to stretch for it. Xian was so consumed he did not notice my movement was something other than a frantic attempt to get away, refusing to be distracted. I could feel myself growing weaker, deflating like a balloon. He was going to kill me, I thought. But at the same time, I knew that was not the goal. My feverish thoughts connected with my panicked vision, which was made faulty by the heat and the pain and the loss of blood, but my fingertips grazed the bottle, and in the next breath, I was able to wrap my hand around it. It was so heavy I nearly dropped it.

Xian tore away just in time to see the bottle before it hit him on the head. He staggered, but otherwise seemed unaffected. The bottle, however, shattered, splintering into several jagged pieces on the ground. The contents met with the fire on the ground, and it took on a whole new life.

The sound of it roaring in my ears was like a scream, a hot cackle as the fates laughed at my attempt to bring him down.

Xian dragged me away from the wall, and I struggled to maintain control of my limbs, but the effort was beyond futile. Even at peak performance, Xian was stronger than me. He dragged me with him from the room, away from the fire and the heat. The inferno was blazing and roaring...if only I'd been able to distract him a short while longer, I might have succeeded.

We'd barely even crossed the threshold into the hallway when Xian threw me away from him. My head collided with the wall, and I sank to the ground trying to get my bearings. My temples were pounding, my world spinning, so when I looked up I was surprised to see him towering above me, his head bent. A thin trail of my blood marked his lips, which were set into a tight line. And yet, for all the cold neutrality his stone-face possessed, his eyes held fire...enough to rival the flames pulsing in the other room.

"I've tried so hard to save you." He said slowly, a shake of his head punctuating his disappointment. "You're all I want Lilith, what I've *always* wanted. And I'm not letting go." He knelt down before me, and I retracted as far into the wall as I could, until I could move no further. His fangs found their purchase once again, and I closed my eyes, finally letting go. I'd failed.

I succumbed, realizing that these were my last seconds and they were going to be spent in agony. I wouldn't be present for this...I'd much rather remember the good, which was brief but the sweetest of things I could imagine: Janna's laugh, her father's unfailing trust in me, James' kiss, his eyes, his gentle touch...

I was fading fast; the world was turning black as my body grew cold despite still being sticky with sweat from the heat. I closed my eyes, holding onto thoughts of James.

Suddenly, the agony ended, and Xian's weight disappeared. I felt myself lifted up and realized it was over. My soul was separating from my body. I sighed, torn between being sad that this life was over and happy that my captivity had ended. I decided to go with the latter, and I breathed in, relishing it for a few moments before opening my eyes to face whatever Hell I'd been banished to.

The face that peered down over me was not the one I'd expected. My vision was hazy; I couldn't be sure it was him. "Julius?" I asked. Not

the worst Hell imaginable; what was he going to do, push me around and throw out snarky comments? I'd take it over Xian any day.

"It's okay, Lilith." His voice was much gentler than I recalled, and I rolled over to see what else Hell had in store for me. And then I realized I wasn't dead. Unless this was some kind of combination of Heaven and Hell, some in between world reserved for the inhuman, with Julius and Xian and James. Bittersweet though it was, I didn't think that was the sort of afterlife I'd be granted.

"James?" I tried to say his name, but my voice was raspy. I sounded like I'd been swallowing rocks, but I realized it was the smoke, which had thickened. James may not have heard me; he didn't look at me. He was consumed with Xian, whom he had backed against the wall.

Julius and I moved past James towards the front door, which had been left open to allow the morning light in. Julius stepped out into the blinding morning, but it still felt too hot, even with the wind whipping around us. I winced, barring my eyes from the assault, and turned to look at the receding shape of my father's home as Julius carried me away. Through a confused haze, I saw glass burst as the fire ravaged Xian's room, the curtains consumed in their hunger, flames licking the outside of the house.

I wasn't convinced I wasn't dying. I wanted to call out to James, to know that he was okay, but talking seemed like a colossal waste of energy, particularly when he was so far, so I sighed.

There was a wrought-iron bench in what remained of the wasted gardens, somewhere underneath the sun. Julius deposited me there. "You're safe out here, Lilith." He assured me. "So just stay put."

"Julius?" I tried. But even I didn't know what I meant to say, fortunately, since he paid me no mind. He made his way back to the house in long, powerful strides.

I leaned my head back over the armrest and closed my eyes, in no position to argue.

A few deep breaths later, I opened my eyes again. I stood slowly, allowing the world to shift back into place and took a step back to see the damage. Before me, the great doors were still open, effectively cordoning off the first floor so that there was nowhere to run.

Something in the air alerted me to their approach. The ground trembled with the force of their feet on the ground. Upon turning, I saw the pack of wolves running for the house. I stayed still a moment, watching them, taken aback by their numbers, wondering who among them I knew. And when they ran past me, a thunderous blur, I followed them.

At first, I could barely set foot in front of the other, but with each step, the world shifted back into place, my vision becoming steady and my balance returning to me. By the time I had reached the door, I was able to run, just in time to see a werewolf lunge at Xian, pushing him towards the flames on the wall. I looked around, regaining the last of my wavering breath, watching the wolves invade my former home. They ran up the steps, cornering some vampires that had come downstairs to see what the commotion was, and engaged in combat with my brothers.

Everything had taken on a new clarity, a precision that hadn't been there before. The way that everyone else moved, every little action so full of intention and purpose, the way they looked as if a gauzy sort of film had been stripped away, the way I could *smell* their fear, their hatred, and their dismay. A jolt of electricity pulsed through my veins as I realized what had happened to me. I'd gone from the brink of death to more alive than I'd ever felt in just a matter of minutes. A ferocity, a desire that rivalled anything I'd ever felt, tore through me. Xian had succeeded. He'd turned me.

I raced for the staircase, certain of what it was I had to do. I'd set out to bring Calista back, and that was exactly what I intended to do. I didn't doubt that Xian had left her body in the house, somewhere that he could use it against me if I gave him occasion. He wouldn't have expected me to break so soon, or to turn the tables on him. No, I was certain that he'd have left her body somewhere among us. I ran to my room, expecting he'd had her laid there after I'd left. I didn't expect to see her lying on my bed, posed as though she were sleeping. She looked serene, just as graceful as she had been in life, except for the dried blood that webbed over her delicate skin like ink on a page.

Her hands were clasped on her chest, but underneath them she held something. I drew closer, cautious, but paused when I stood at her side. The sight of her made my chest ache in a way I didn't understand. Moving her seemed wrong. But that edge of paper that poked out from under her

delicate hands intrigued me. I moved slowly, the way I would have if I feared she might spontaneously come back to life and kill me. It wasn't her I was afraid of—it was the possibility of what I would find on that paper.

My own face looked back at me. Or rather, I thought it was my face... It looked identical, right down to the high cheek bones. But the woman in the photograph was not me. When I looked closer I could see that her hair was several different shades of blonde. And her eyes...they were green.

I didn't realize I had stopped breathing until I let it all out of my lungs in one crucial moment of revelation. I was looking at my mother.

Despite never having seen her (at least not in my conscious memory), I realized I'd know her face anywhere. I didn't know how we could look so much alike, and yet she was so much more beautiful than me. But I saw it in her face, in the way her eyes caught the light and her lips were parted in something between a smile and a laugh: she had been happy.

I looked around for something more, but I was alone and everything seemed to be still in its place. Why would Xian have put this picture here, and where had he gotten it? Was it possible that my father had kept it for all those years? Had he really been able to make her as happy as she had been in that moment, alive and full of joy? I stared at the picture, lost in those thoughts, until I heard a floorboard creak somewhere outside the room.

I had just shoved the picture in my pocket and turned around when a man stepped into the door frame. He was tall and imposing; his arms were covered by a brown leather jacket, but I suspected that underneath that, it was pure muscle. "Lilli?" He spoke with an accent. I couldn't have guessed whatever it was, but I knew well enough that he wasn't from around here. I also knew that I'd never seen him before.

I braced myself, prepared for the attack that was sure to come. But he only stared at me. It wasn't even in a way that I could describe; there seemed to be some kind of shield around him, like he was impervious to any emotion. That made him all the more frightening. "I don't know you." I managed to choke out.

His dark eyes were heavy on me. He seemed to be debating something. "It really is you?"

I straightened, remembering Calista's form as she had faced Xian. She'd had to be scared, and yet she'd remained impassive. I would do the same. "You're on the losing side of the war." I warned him, still coiled for attack.

He laughed, flashing perfectly white teeth. It made him look less cruel than he'd been just moments before. "I'm on your side." He laughed again. "Holy fuck."

Something about the way he regarded me took me off balance. I openly scrutinized him, and he didn't seem to mind. He wasn't a vampire; that was obvious. He was lacking all of the hallmark signs. But the possibility of him being a werewolf was even less likely, though still possible. Something told me that wasn't it, though, which left only one thing: a hunter.

I tried to say something—it didn't matter what, since he doubtless didn't care—but my stammer was drowned out by the sound of a horrifying scream. It resonated in my bones, ate through to my very core. Without giving it a second thought, I pushed past the man in the doorway and sprinted through the hall until I found the source of the cries.

Janna was on her knees, so small against the backdrop of arching cathedral ceilings. Her back was to me, her hair hanging over her face as she leaned forward, sobbing over a body.

I stopped, suddenly terrified to move. I imagined what sight would greet me on the other side of her, and it was one I couldn't prepare myself for. Even after all the death I'd witnessed, hearts ripped straight from the chest and necks spun at impossible angles, after all the blood I'd ever seen—oceans of it—I couldn't ever be ready to face that. I grabbed hold of the wall, suddenly breathless and dizzy. Janna's cries became the only sound I could hear, and even they were muted. The corners of my vision dimmed, and I was sure I would faint.

And then somebody grabbed me, dragging me backwards down a narrow hallway with one cold hand over my mouth, the other tight around my neck. I knew it was him. Xian dragged me a short distance before shoving me into the wall and leaning in close. I fought wildly against him; I thought my grief alone could kill him, but his anger proved to be stronger. He was always stronger. He pinned my arms above my head and ground me into the cold stone with his chest. "I'm really sick of your games." He

hissed. I noticed the deep scratch mark that spanned across his formerly delicate cheek. It made me swell with satisfaction. “This is your official last chance. Quit with the childish charades, and maybe when I’m done with you I will kill you. That’s what you want, Lilith, isn’t it? It’s what you’ve always wanted!” His voice, though meant to be a whisper, was sharp and dripping with unconcealed venom. His chest rose and fell rapidly, despite the fact that he had been centuries without the need for air.

The anger that I’d caused him, the rage that had built up under that façade of nonchalance, was cracking him. He was losing everything he’d fought for, everything that had led him from his humanity to this. I’d thought I wanted him dead. Just this morning, I would have given nearly anything for that. But now, I realized the delicious gravity of what I could do to him. Everything he’d ever done to me, every well-aimed kick, every agonizing bite, every little thing he’d ever said that had made me feel worthless. None of it was anything, compared to what I was doing to him right now. This was the most delicious form of revenge I could imagine. And despite the fact that I knew he was dangerous like this, so close to the edge, I couldn’t help the warmth that took over me, a potent mix of retribution and malice that flowed through my veins like honey, thick and sweet.

“No.” I laughed, drunk on the feeling, the intoxicating power of it. “Death isn’t what I’ve always wanted. What I’ve wanted, what I didn’t even know I wanted until this very moment, was to see you like this. *Broken.*”

Xian tightened the hand around my neck, but it didn’t faze me. “You’ve taken everything I have.” I continued. “You broke me, and every time I put myself back together, you broke me again, throwing stones at me when you knew I was fragile. I’m not anymore. You are.”

His nails tightened against the skin of my neck, slowly digging into the scarred flesh there, but the pain didn’t wash away my bliss. I smiled still. “You’ve taken everything from me.” I told him. “Go ahead.”

I could feel him, flexing his hands against my neck in an unsuccessful attempt to leash his fury. And it made me even happier, if that were possible. I had foolishly believed that he had meant to use me as a scapegoat, an excuse to wage war, whether because he wanted to be seen as a romantic or a martyr I’d never decided. I’d thought he was bent upon

having me back to prove a point. I'd thought he just enjoyed torturing me so much, he would do anything to continue.

Now, it was glaringly obvious. He'd had a thousand chances to kill me, years ago while I'd slept in his arms unaware of his true nature and more recently while I'd been looking the other way. It wasn't beyond him to stab someone in the back, after all. But I was alive for a reason. He needed something from me. I didn't know what, but he needed me alive.

If I could provoke him, get him to kill me now, like this, it would ruin whatever he intended. My death would undermine everything he'd been planning, probably from the minute he'd laid eyes on me. Getting him to kill me now, laying those past two years to waste, would be the sweetest form of revenge, a mix even more heady than this. Not that I would enjoy it once I was dead.

His nails pierced the skin; I tried to keep back my pained moan, but it managed to find its way out of my soul, twining with my sense of triumph so that it became a sort of laugh. He stopped immediately, loosening his grip. I refused to take my eyes from his, silently daring him to do it, even when the thunderous sound of footsteps echoed in my ears. Xian stood, unflinching, unspeaking, until the last second when his hand released me entirely. He was gone before I even sank to the floor, still smiling stupidly.

“Lilith!” My own name sounded like thunder in my ears, an indecipherable sound. A hand moved to my neck, applying pressure, but I stared at the spot where Xian had been just seconds before. The euphoria that coursed through me distanced me from everything: the faces, the words they spoke, the sound of the footsteps that crashed off in pursuit of Xian. It wasn’t until James grabbed my face in his hands with eyes full of worry that I crashed back into myself.

“James?” I breathed his name, afraid saying it loudly would break whatever spell this was.

“I’m here. It’s ok. Julius will find him.” James promised me. “Are you ok?” He looked at the blood that seeped out from under his hand, sticky and warm against my skin. It seemed a strange question, but I knew he meant it as a question of my mentality. It was the first I’d seen him since I’d left, and though it couldn’t have been more than a day or two ago, it seemed like it had been a lifetime.

I nodded and threw my arms around him. James reciprocated, folding me into him, my arms still looped around his neck. I'd been so sure he was gone. The way Janna had cried, like she'd lost a loved one... But James was here, and this was real. It had to be; you couldn't feel pain in dreams.

My unspoken question was answered when we emerged into the main corridor. It was Olias who lay on the ground, cold and empty, not unlike I'd last seen him. And Janna kneeled still at his side, his hand pressed between hers, dark hair forming a curtain that obscured her face. But I could hear her sobs; her cries still echoed in the empty space of my memory. "Janna..." Her name wasn't much more than a mumble on my lips. If she heard it, she didn't pay any attention to me.

"Let her grieve." James told me, his voice subdued. He turned his head to nod at someone, a wordless command: stay with her. Desmond nodded his understanding, though he hadn't looked like he was going anywhere to begin with.

"I don't understand." I mumbled. But my words disappeared in the plume of black smoke that billowed out around the staircase, choking the air upward. James paused just long enough for me to see—or rather, not see—the whole downstairs obscured in the black clouds. I choked on it, felt it burning through me, but James descended the stairs with me still in his arms, undaunted. I trusted James; it was why I allowed myself to relax into him even as we disappeared together into the thick of it. I tried to keep my eyes open but it burned, so I screwed them shut until the air lightened, taking on the smell of leaves and the wind.

It was cold outside, but not unpleasantly so, and when I opened my eyes it was to the mild sun, hanging low in the crisp pink sky. Even as it neared sunset, the sky burning bright and blood orange, I knew he'd escaped. When it had been a church, the building had offered sanctuary from persecution. It had once been a safe haven for all. I remembered playing in those tunnels, imagining the people that had hidden there until it was safe to leave. And though I'd never found it, I knew there was an exit, a way to escape persecution.

. Over time, I'd sort of forgotten the tunnels existed, but why wouldn't they? The whole city was built around them. They spanned from the werewolves den to different locations in the city, the woods, even by the

sea. I understood, now, how Xian had been coming to us in the past few weeks. Underground, time had no meaning. He could taunt us in daylight or night, if he was careful. He'd been slipping out, literally right under my father's nose.

I watched the house now, as James carried me away from the mess and the chaos. Windows were shattered, bodies lie charred on the ground, a last desperate attempt to escape the werewolves. A chorus of screams seemed to pulse in that house, as though the very walls were finally letting loose, lamenting on all the horrors they'd witnessed over the years. And as the fire raged and we made our escape, I couldn't help feeling victorious despite my failure. Xian was gone...Julius could chase him, but he wouldn't find him. And Janna was still in there, though the people James had charged with her care would ensure she got out alive. The queen was dead, my father was dead, Olias was dead. I didn't know who else was. Dozens, at the very least. It had been a blood bath severe enough to paint the walls, and yet a sense of pride flickered in me, faint as my pulse, while I watched the walls crumble.

The ashes that flew through the autumn air, drifting on the heat of the fire, made me lighter. At last, that house was gone. And as I watched my prison burn, I knew that despite the chain of circumstance that tethered my future, I was finally free.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

“We have to go after them!”

The windows seemed to shake with the tenor of Julius’ anger. James watched him wearily, his features hardened by the ordeal he’d just been through. Janna sat next to him, more quiet than I’d ever imagined she was capable of being, her thoughts lost... probably still with Olias in the ashes of my past.

A few of the elders sat around the chamber, looking worried or nervous or upset. They whispered to each other and cast long, thoughtful looks at us. It was as if everybody in the room were dying, their energy drained by the grief and exhaustion that their earlier altercation had sapped them of. Everybody except Julius, who was alight with anger, spurred by a refusal to accept defeat. And me. I was alight with energy, as if every nerve in my body were exposed.

“He’s right.” The words tumbled out of me from some place I didn’t even recognize. “We can’t just sit around. Every moment we waste here, they get further away. And the further away they get, the more dangerous they become.”

“If we just let them go on their way, we are opening ourselves to attack!” Julius continued feverishly. “With all the death around here, I don’t think anyone is up for another fight like that.”

“The longer they are out there, the more people that will be in danger.” I chimed. “We can’t let them get away!”

“I propose we break up into several directions. If we get out into groups of four, we should be able to cover our bases and still have considerable protection here. But we have to move fast, or we will miss our chance.”

“Enough.” One of the elders stood. He was short—the size of a child—but his hair was entirely white. “I don’t know if either of you realize that dozens of lives were just lost. The queen, may she rest in peace, is gone and you’re worried about going back out there and risking more lives.” He clucked his tongue in disapproval and shook his head.

“She was my *mother!*” Julius roared.

His eyes softened on his brother and sister, looking as defeated as we all felt. He took a breath. “And that is why we must fight back.”

“That is why we must not!” James broke his silence; his voice was sharper than I’d expected. “These lives are too valuable to be wasted upon retaliation. We are above that.”

“What are you saying?” Julius snorted. “Let them keep on? How many times are you going to let them get the better of you?”

“Julius,” Janna’s voice was soft, almost pleading, but even she couldn’t quell his anger. She didn’t have the strength to try.

“They killed our sister, in case you’ve forgotten! *They tore her apart!* And our mother! Xian is responsible for father’s death, and let’s not forget all the people today! Evan and Marcus! Lucinda and Connor and Matthias! Olias!” His chest rose and fell violently with his passion. I felt only a fraction of what he did, surely, and yet the way it crashed through me was potent enough to keep me trying. “Where does it end?”

“An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.” James’ voice was distant, as though the words were merely a recitation of something he’d heard but never truly believed. I didn’t doubt they were.

“So you’ll sit back and do nothing?!” Julius slammed his fist into the wooden table. I jumped, but everybody looked at him passively; this was the sort of behavior that they expected from him.

“We will wait.” James said it like it was meant as a compromise, but I knew it was his ruling. “When the time is right—”

“The time will never be right!” Julius interjected. “How far can they push you, James? I don’t even know you anymore.” He shook his head sadly and turned like he was going to go. He seemed to think better of it. “What makes you tick? Is it her?” He shot me an accusatory look, as if James’ hesitance to take action were upon my request.

James said nothing, but something in his face changed...hardened. His jaw tensed. “So that’s it then?” Julius snapped, shrugging his massive shoulders. He looked to Janna, but she said nothing, her silence affirming a dedication to her brother’s decision. “So the king has spoken.” His voice was bitter as he backed toward the door, shaking his head. “You’re a coward.”

I looked at James desperately, and then turned, following his brother from the room.

Julius was already halfway down the hall when I made it out the door, and after running to catch up with him, I inserted myself in his path, barring his exit—as if that would have done anything. “You’re leaving.” I knew the answer; it was more of a statement of fact than a question.

“I’m not going to sit back and wait for something to happen. I’ve got matters to attend to.” He made to push me aside with a well-muscled arm, but I dug my feet into the ground and resisted him.

“What about Janna?”

“What about her?” His voice was gruff, layered to sound unconcerned, but the hesitation in his eyes betrayed him.

“She’s grieving. I don’t know what happened between them, but Olias’ death wrecked her. How can you walk away and leave her?”

“It’s better this way.” He attempted to push by me again, but I held my ground, refusing to move. I pushed back against him, noticing the tear in his leather jacket. Suddenly, everything made a lot more sense. I sucked in a sharp breath.

“Because you’re dying too...”

“What?”

“Your sleeve.” I nodded at his arm. “You were bitten.”

Julius faced me, impassive. “So?”

“So you have, what, three days?”

“Something like that.” He shrugged and began walking again, prepared to leave and never look back.

“And you aren’t going to tell her?”

“It’s better this way.” Julius repeated. But he didn’t seem to believe it.

“You’re worried about your dignity.” I accused. It was a shot in the dark, but in the light of day, it made sense. “You don’t want her to see you go through that.”

Surprisingly, he smiled. “You’re not as dumb as you look.”

“You’re just going to disappear? No letter, no explanation... nothing?”

“I’m sure you’ll do that for me. Besides, you’re one to talk about pride.” This time, when he pushed me aside I let him elbow by me. And then I followed.

“And what is that supposed to mean?”

Julius stopped, turned around with a small smile on his face. “Nothing.”

This time, I let him go with no further questions. When I turned around, it was to face the man who’d been in my room just before Olias died. He looked at me sadly, the way I’d imagine you would look at a ghost that no longer frightened you. But he did frighten me. “What are you doing here?”

I saw James over his shoulder, a respectable distance, but his nod assured me that he was there, that nothing would happen to me. “I don’t even know where to begin.” He said, looking truly bewildered. “Can we go for a walk?”

“No.” I crossed my arms. “Did you put that picture on Calista’s chest?” I demanded.

“What picture?” The man’s eyes narrowed, something like concern and suspicion shaping them.

“I’ll take that as a no. So, let me ask again: who are you and what are you doing here?”

“My name is Sam.”

The name stirred something in my brain, but I was tired. It took a lot of thought to trace it back to that Robert Frost poem with the name hastily scrawled upon it. “Samuel?”

“Only to family...which, you are.”

I blinked, trying to make some connection between the meanings of his words. I tried to reconcile him as the son of Gabrielle, who had used her last weeks on this Earth trying to help me to escape. And yet, he was saying he was family. I looked to James, uncertain, but he only nodded, telling me to hear him out. “Was Gabrielle your mother?” I asked.

Sam shook his head. “Gabrielle was a spy. She was sent to Providence as an informant of mine. She was just doing her job when she found you. And she probably would have never known any better, if she hadn’t seen your necklace.” His eyes looked to where it should have been, as if seeking confirmation. “Once she told me about that, I knew it was you.”

“So Gabrielle wasn’t your mother?” I’d left on the mission of offering her some final act of redemption. Now, Sam was telling me that she hadn’t even been his mother. Just some woman who had worked for him, for whatever reason a forty year old woman would have had to spy for a man half her age.

“No.” Sam shook his head. “My mother’s name was Evelyn. She died a long time ago, only a few months after she and my sister went missing.” Sam stepped forward and I stepped back, refusing to accept the direction that his story was headed in. He grabbed the collar of his shirt and gave it a tug to reveal a tattoo of two interlocking triangles. My heart hammered hard into my chest, unsure of whether to trust this stranger, or of what to make of the tattoo that perfectly matched the necklace that had been stolen from me, a token of my mother. “My mother was yours, Lilith.”

I’d been shaking my head, small and subtle movements, but now I was rattling my brain into my skull with the force. “You’re lying.”

“I’m not. You and our mother disappeared from the face of the Earth when we were just a little over a year old. We thought you were dead.”

“We?”

“Father and I. He searched everywhere for you, for years. He never stopped looking—from Rome to Africa to Denmark, we looked for you.”

The story was ridiculously over-wrought. And the biggest problem I had with it was that it made no sense. “Why would our mother run away? Why would she leave you?”

“She didn’t.” Sam’s voice was sad. “You were kidnapped... both of you. Arich, the man who kept you locked up all those years... he stole you and our mother.”

I thought of all the years he’d kept me out of sight, sending me to my room whenever a new guest was visiting, telling me that children were

to be neither seen nor heard unless it was asked of them... He couldn't have been my father, I'd known that all along. That was impossible. But then, so was I. "Why would he kidnap us?" I didn't sound as doubtful as I felt. It made sense, despite my not wanting to believe it.

"Because of what you are. Lilith, you're a zenith."

He said the word like it was a position of reverence, but it had no meaning to me. James came to stand with me now, wrapping an arm around me. But I stared at the young man before me who claimed to be my brother and was calling me strange things, desperate to know what he meant and equally as desperate for him to be wrong. I didn't know what it would mean if he was telling the truth, but I couldn't handle another upheaval in my world. "Which is what?"

Sam looked at James, as if seeking help, but there was nothing James could do. "You've heard of the Allon sisters? Celeste, Lilith, and Zenith?"

I glanced at James, the one who'd told me all I knew of Celeste and Lilith. He squeezed my arm gently, like he was trying to give me some kind of strength. "No." I said.

"Well," He let out a sigh. "Our father is so much better at explaining these kinds of things. The abbreviated version is that they were the first three humans. Lilith was kidnapped and corrupted by the fallen angel Lucifer, Celeste fell in love with a latter-born werewolf, and Zenith was left alone in the middle, watching her sister's wage war against each other. They fought for her, each of them desperate for her to pick a side, but Zenith refused. She served as an intermediary, the in-between who kept peace between her sisters and, subsequently the werewolves and vampires."

"But she lived long ago. How can you say I am her?"

"Not her." Sam shook his head, a wave of sandy hair falling into his face. "One of her descendants, just like me, just like our parents. Zenith refused to choose sides with her sisters, but the fighting drove her mad. She ate out the heart of one werewolf and one vampire and cast a spell. It transformed her into something that was everything and nothing. She was not werewolf, not human, not vampire. Zenith couldn't watch either of her sisters be destroyed, so she chose both sides. It made her powerful—all the strength of a werewolf, the speed of a vampire—but not bound to the

conventions of either. She could not be controlled—not by the sun, not by the moon, not by her sisters, or God, or Lucifer. She became the pinnacle—the untouchable thing that stood out of reach from the rest. That is what we are.”

I felt a little bit of nausea threaten to tip my stomach at the thought of being descended from someone who ate hearts, but I guess it was no worse than being descended from someone who feasted on babies or drank the blood of the innocent. I didn’t want to believe him, this stranger who thought he could so casually insert himself and his theories into my life, but I did. Because I’d always known that the man who’d never been able to offer a kind word to me couldn’t have really been my father. And because why else did the sun not burn me? Why didn’t I need blood? Why had I never been turned, until now?

“Xian bit me. I’ve already changed. I can feel it.”

“No.” Sam shook his head. “You’ve ascended. Look, I know this is a lot to take in. James was kind enough to offer me a room. I’ll give you time to sort through this on your own. Whenever you want to talk about it, I’ll be there.”

He and James shared a curt nod before he walked away, his hands thrust in his pockets. I turned to James, dizzy with all the weight of these new revelations, of the implications. The relief on James’ face sent a surge of it through me, too. “You’re not dying.” He said against the thick scarf that Iz had brought to cover the bruises on my neck.

Hearing him say it felt like having a weight removed from my chest, and I collapsed into him a little more. He was worn down, exhausted, and paper thin from all the grief of the past few weeks. He’d lost his father and his mother, and now his brother had run off too. But the joy on his face was pure, untainted. I held fast to him and he held tightly onto me, while we tried to figure out what exactly this meant for us. “All those years that your father...*Arich*... kept you locked away...everything that Xian ever did or said to you...it was because they were scared of you, Lilith.”

I laughed, because it was a ridiculous thought. About as ridiculous as being descended from a crazy witch who had eaten the hearts of a werewolf and a vampire so that she could obtain the powers of both. That made me laugh more, and I laughed so hard that James eventually joined in too. I had to wipe away a tear when our laughter finally subsided.

We walked together into the maze, to the courtyard where we had lay at the start of a storm not even seven days ago, something beautiful kindling between us. We lay exactly as we had that night, watching the tree branches sway and the clouds pass us by without a care in the world. “You’re not dying.” James repeated, kissing my cheek and pulling away just enough to see my face. “Because my bite had no effect on you. We aren’t bound. You aren’t bound to anything, or anybody, Lilith.” I didn’t understand why he kept saying my name. I liked the thrill of it, but something about its implication I wasn’t fond of. “You can do and be whoever you want. You cannot be controlled, not by anybody. You don’t need to be afraid anymore, ever, because you are the zenith. You’re as free as it gets.”

His smile was sad, despite his best effort to make it appear otherwise. He couldn’t keep it out of his eyes, which just might be permanently scarred from all the carnage he’d witnessed recently. I grabbed him and held on tight, because I didn’t want to let go, not now or ever. I closed my eyes, trying to understand the gravity of what this meant, but thought only of Janna screaming in anguish. Smoke billowed still, black against the clouds as the fire had spread to the neighboring trees and carried to us on the wind.

Xian could be anywhere, perhaps even watching us from just a few yards away. I had been right when I’d realized he needed me alive for something, and that something was power. He would not let it go so easily, like smoke slipping through a crisp autumn sky. But the thought didn’t scare me—at least, not as much as it had just a week ago.

I was something beyond his control, something he could never be. I was the thing that could control the man that nightmares were made of, the girl who could keep even the most powerful of men from absolute rule. I had been all along. No, there was nothing to fear...not from Xian.

“You gave me my freedom already.” I pulled away so that I could see him and squeezed his hand. “I was free all along, fighting for something I already had.”

“What now?” James asked. It seemed like a funny question, coming from the King. But he wasn’t the king to me. To me, he was the thing I’d been fighting for, the one that had helped foster those things in me,

those feelings of love and acceptance, of another and myself. He was all I wanted.

“I don’t know.” I admitted. “But whatever it is, we’ll face it together.”

“As boyfriend and girlfriend?” A playful smile tugged at his lips. Despite his grief, he looked lighter than I’d ever seen him.

“As the King and the woman who loves him.”

James folded me into him and pressed a kiss to my forehead. “As King and Queen. Wherever we go from here, we go together.”

I let my eyes close, relishing the weightlessness of this feeling. A whole new world of problems had been presented to me, Julius was dying, and Janna was a disaster. There was a stranger in the house who claimed he was my brother, a vampire who we had no idea what to do with, and a mountain of ashes miles away that had been people once, both good and bad. The vampires were running loose, Xian had escaped, and there were dozens of women and children and men inside awaiting their marching orders. But for the first time in a long time, I wasn’t worried. We stayed there, barely moving, barely speaking for hours, until the moon danced and the stars cast a pattern around us. Because for the first time in a long while, I had nothing but time.